Omiai

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Omiai

by iesika

Summary

Will acquires a murderous secret admirer, and learns how much easier the habit of violence can be with an enthusiastically willing target.

A courtship through blood and… other means of influence.

Notes

Thank you to glymr, who was so kind to review this for me despite the fandom and content not being her cup of tea.

This fic on tumblr

Kettō

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's never really noticed the painting before.

That seems strange. He's passed through this waiting room about a million times in the last few months, or at least it feels that way. Maybe it's because he was usually so stuck in his own head - or maybe the encephalitis had been to blame.

Or maybe it had more to do with how Hannibal always opens the door to him pretty much exactly when he arrives, whenever he arrives. By the second time he'd come here, he'd already taken for granted that he could just show up whenever he needed to and demand Hannibal's time and focus. Hannibal is that good of a doctor - always willing to drop everything and help a patient with whatever they need, even if that means they let themselves into his home late at night or bang on the door early in the morning. Even if it means feeding their dogs or bringing them homemade chicken soup when their brain is on fire.

If Hannibal knew he was out here, he'd have invited him in already. The complete silence on the other side of the thick door suggests he doesn't have a patient at the moment. Knowing his usual habits, he's probably sitting quietly at his desk, making notes in his files or working on those crazily detailed architectural drawings he seems to favor. Will's pretty sure he's only ever seen Hannibal turn his deft hand to that kind of formal, precise reconstruction - no doodles or sketches, no portraits, nothing fantastical, never anything sitting in the room with him. It seems fitting to Will, matching with the strict organization of the man's workspaces, both psychiatric and culinary. Everything clean and orderly, organized in mind and habits and environment.

Not like the painting on his waiting room wall. Jesus, had Will really never noticed it? He's pretty sure he took it in at a glance when he arrived here, the first time - which was maybe the only time Hannibal had kept him waiting for longer than it took Will to take his jacket off and put his keys away. At the time his main impression was probably "pretentious oil painting, classically bare bodies, fancy frame." It should have occurred to him, once he knew Hannibal better, that he should probably give it a second look.

The painting is of a raft on the ocean under a dawning sky with dark clouds. There's a crowd of men, all races and colors, climbing over their supplies and each other to reach out to some speck on the horizon - a ship? Hopeful of rescue, maybe. It's the rest of the painting that's more interesting, really, because on closer inspection maybe a third of the figures on the raft are probably supposed to be dead. Their bodies are limp, hanging off into the water or piled together, entangled with the limbs of the living.

The office door clicks quietly open behind him. Will doesn't turn from his inspection of the canvas, aware of Hannibal's brief pause and then approaching footsteps, but too fascinated by the skin discoloration on a waterlogged corpse to look away. It's as good an excuse to avoid eye contact as any.

"Le Radeau de la Méduse," Hannibal says, the French rolling liquid off his tongue. "The Raft of the Medusa. The painter Théodore Géricault became obsessed with the wreck of the freighter Méduse, near Mauritania, and its tragic aftermath. Nearly one hundred and fifty men put to sea on a raft made from the scavenged remains of the grounded ship. Thirteen days later, the raft was found with fifteen living men aboard."

Will's eyes drift over the painting as Hannibal speaks, taking in the lovingly highlighted musculature of the straining men that had deceived him into thinking the painting was more traditional. "These guys look pretty good for two weeks of no food or water."

"Oh, they had plenty to eat," Hannibal says, his tone fairly light considering the subject matter. "It wasn't only the Méduse who was scavenged. According to the survivors who Géricault interviewed, most of those lost died by human hands, either by murder or suicide, and those who could stomach that violence did not go hungry. Many of the weak were thrown to the sharks by the strong. Those who remained to be rescued were true survivors."

"Just ten percent of those aboard," Will mused, "though it sounds like it could have been more if those survivors hadn't been murderers, too. Maybe the other one-thirty-five should have tossed these guys off at the beginning."

"Ah," Hannibal says with evident delight. "The idea that removing some human beings from society will improve society as a whole. The basis behind our current justice system. Kill the bad or deprive them of freedom, so the good people can get on with living their good lives in the best way. Doing bad things to bad people so that the good can have their peace. We have talked about how satisfying that can feel."

Hannibal had taken a step or two closer while he was talking, and Will can now feel his body heat an inch from his arm and smell a subtle hint of fine cologne. Will shifts his weight and tries not to become distracted.

"And yet, if the majority had expelled those few, they would have been just as guilty of murder as the men in this painting. And it's exceedingly unlikely so many would have survived with their meager supply of water. As it was, there were still many who died of dehydration. With such limited resources, the end result may well have been the same. In fact, we have no way of knowing that isn't exactly what happened. Perhaps those who remained were those who fancied themselves so virtuous at the start."

Will snorts and shakes his head. "They're too happy to see their rescuers." He rocks his weight further from the gravitational temptation of Hannibal's body heat and draws one arm out from under his folded jacket to point at the center of the painting with a distressingly damp hand. "That guy," he indicates one figure almost hidden in the shadow of the mast and the other men. "He's the only one who seems to comprehend what they've all done."

Hannibal hums in thought behind him and leans in close for a better look, the front of his shoulder pressed to the back of Will's. The tickle of his breath and the low rumble of his voice makes Will's skin prickle and his hair stand on end. "I'm trying to decide if he actually resembles you, or if it is just the pose that gives the impression." His fingertips brushed the small of Will's back, drawing Will's attention away from the dark-haired man crouched in obvious terror and misery at the center of the raft, hands clutching at his hair and face. "Or

perhaps there is only one expression a sane man can wear while comprehending such carnage."

Will can't help leaning into the touch just slightly, pressing their shoulders together and gentling into the touch on his back. It's so rare for anyone to touch him - just Hannibal, now that Alana...doesn't, anymore. "He looks guilty, to me."

"Does he?" The hand on his back moves slightly, and there's a faint brush of air against his cheek. "I suppose we don't know his role in events," Hannibal concedes. "And this is a small-scale reproduction, after all. I'll have to take a closer look at his expression in the original the next time I'm in Paris." His hand on Will's back slide up to pat him twice between the shoulder blades before he steps away. "I wasn't expecting you today, but I haven't any other appointments scheduled for the rest of the evening. Shall we step inside?"

Will shakes himself out of his hypnosis and turns to follow Hannibal into the office proper. "I won't keep you long."

"You may keep me for as long as you like," Hannibal says brightly as he shuts the door behind them. "Here, let me take your coat." He reaches out and gently tugs the dangling sleeve of the jacket. At the same moment, Will steps back, trying his best to dodge. In the resulting tangle, he bobbles the bottle he's been hiding under his jacket, and if it weren't for Hannibal's quick reflexes it would have shattered and the contents would probably have done something terrible to the hardwood floor. Instead, Hannibal catches it neatly by the neck at about the level of their knees and lifts it to inspect the label. "This is a very fine bottle of bourbon, Will."

Will winces and takes the bottle back, his heart pounding from the near miss. "I hope so. I was a little more confident in my ability to pick out a good whiskey than a bottle of wine." The twenty year reserve is the most expensive single thing he's ever purchased that he couldn't live in, drive, or fish from. He turns it awkwardly in his hands, but he just snatched it away from Hannibal; he can't just hand it back to him again. For lack of anything better to do with it, he takes the few steps to Hannibal's desk and sets it down there, saving the label from his sweaty palms. He can breathe a bit better with that little bit of space between them, so he takes the momentary reprieve to try and get himself under control again. "It's for you."

Hannibal gives him the much needed space, crossing the room to the back corner, instead, to the cabinet from which Will had seen him conjure wine glasses in the past. "It's a lovely gift. Are we celebrating? Toasting your renewed good health?"

"No, I-" Hannibal turns just as Will looks up, revealing a crystal glass in either hand. "It's for you, Dr. Lecter. A gift. A thank you."

Hannibal freezes, then, his slight smile sliding into a serious, considering expression. He examines Will until Will looks away - probably keeps examining him, actually, but at least Will doesn't have to watch him do it. "You thanked me at the hospital, Will. Not that thanks were necessary. In truth, I wish I'd been able to do more for you."

"You did plenty," Will says quietly. "I had my last follow up brain-scan this morning - well, last for a few months, they want to check up later. But I got the all clear. Dr. Sutcliffe took me

off the last of the drugs."

"That's wonderful news," Hannibal says. He seems to come unstuck, moving back toward the desk and Will. "Not least because it should now be quite safe for you to join me in a drink without me grilling you about your medication." He sets the glasses down next to the bottle, and Will watches his capable hands, manicured and moisturized but showing the wear and tear of a life not always easily lived.

Will might have spent too much time watching those hands, already, but it's better than trying to make eye contact right now. "I wasn't planning to stay," he admits.

He watches as his words still Hannibal's hands again before they can uncap the bottle.

Hannibal remains silent, so Will runs his hands through his hair and over his face before turning away. He leans back against the edge of the desk, half-sitting, keeping Hannibal firmly behind him and out of sight. "You saved my life, you know. Getting me in to see Sutcliffe when you did. Everyone kept saying how good it was to catch the encephalitis when they did, and how much worse it could have gotten. Just knowing I was sick and not crazy was… huge. But there was this guy in the waiting room today who was complaining about having to make his appointment six months ago, and all I could think was - six months, I'd have been dead in six months, or locked up somewhere to keep me from hurting myself or someone else. So whatever strings you pulled to get me in there so fast, I am really damned grateful. For that and for... everything else."

"And so, you've come to pay your perceived debts," Hannibal says. His voice is...tight. There's clearly a great deal of emotion behind it, but it's tamped down, or reined in. Without turning to look at him Will can't be sure what the other man is feeling. Eye contact is the last thing he wants, though.

"I know with everything you've done for me, you deserve more than a bottle of hooch," Will admits. "I'm not paying you off, Dr. Lecter, I'm just… it's supposed to be a gesture."

God, Hannibal already knows how bad Will is at this kind of thing. Why is he keeping Will dangling on this particular hook? Tension between them is hardly new, especially here in this office with the difficult subjects they tackle, but Will still finds himself at a loss, unsure what Hannibal is feeling or why. Is he angry?

"There's no way I could actually pay you back for all your help," Will tries. "I didn't think therapy would help me at all, but you really saved my life, saved my sanity. I'm really-"

"You intend this to be a goodbye," Hannibal interrupts, and yeah, Will's pretty sure he's at least a little angry. "As you are no longer hallucinating or walking in your sleep you have decided you needn't maintain a relationship with a psychiatrist."

Will sighs and pushes off from the desk, headed for the coat rack where his jacket hangs. "I'm fine now. Encephalitis free. You've wasted enough of your time on me-"

"I've never considered a moment in your company wasted."

Will winces as he pulls his jacket down. He doesn't bother putting it on - it's more useful to have it in his hands as something to look at and fiddle with. "Whatever the bureau's been paying you, it can't possibly cover trips out to Wolf Trap to feed my dogs, and bringing me homemade soup in the hospital."

Hannibal's footsteps start toward him, and shit shit shit, this is so awkward and terrible. Will stops fiddling with his jacket and opens the door, giving up entirely on pretending not to flee. He's halfway across the waiting room when Hannibal calls out, "Will."

Will stops, heart pounding.

"Either you think yourself undeserving of friendship, or you're pushing me away out of reflex because you're afraid not to be alone." Jesus, Hannibal is pissed. That has to be what the tension under his cuttingly polite professionalism means. "Either way, I do still think you would benefit from therapy. Alana or I can give you a referral if you no longer think I'm a good fit."

And then Hannibal goes quiet, just standing there in the doorway, watching as Will struggles into his coat. Will catches sight of him out of the corner of his eye as he turns to the exit, and the surprise nearly floors him, because Hannibal doesn't look angry after all.

"Unless it's just me, I suppose," Hannibal says quietly, eyes on the floor and a small, bitter turn to his lips. "After all, you did say you didn't find me terribly interesting. I apologize if I've imposed myself where I wasn't wanted." He looks up and smiles faintly, and Will has to swallow. "Goodbye, Will. I hope you know I wish you the best."

And then Hannibal shuts the door between them, leaving Will alone in the waiting room with the realization that he's just somehow managed to hurt a man he'd previously thought was completely untouchable.

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He's still off the teaching roster for medical leave, but he has a dozen forensic journals piled up and three articles he's been invited to review despite everything else going on. Between that and retraining his dogs from how spoiled they've been under Hannibal and Alana's rotating care, he theoretically has plenty to occupy his mind. When his leave is up he might do some guest lectures in the class that's replaced his, this semester, or maybe he'll focus on research for a while. A sabbatical to measure maggots at the body farms in Cullowhee or Knoxville sounds relaxing, or Price had said something about anthill burial a while ago that had got Will thinking. He'd used the method to clean frog and bird skeletons as a kid, but for some reason there doesn't seem to be much published on ants in forensic entomology. There's probably a paper or two in it.

The fish are biting, too, which is nice. He can't help wondering if taking a few months off from fishing has made them bolder. He's thigh-deep in frigid water one day and thinks he should ask if Hannibal wants some very fresh trout, and then he remembers that Hannibal isn't his doctor anymore and Will has no reason to call him. Trying to offer his doctor dead fish would have been pretty terrible too, actually. He vacuum seals and freezes what he can't eat within a day or two. It will keep.

He thinks about visiting Abigail, but that's kind of a complicated mess. As much as he'd love to see her, reassure himself that she's okay, he also knows he's been off his fucking rocker the last few times he's seen her and he can't actually trust his own mental narrative from pretty much the day he met her. In hindsight, Alana is probably right about it not being right for Abigail to spend a lot of time alone with the guy who shot her dad. She has Alana, and she has Hannibal, and that's better for her, as much as he wishes he could be the one to help her.

Jack exercises considerable constraint, all things considered. He called Will the day after he got out of the hospital, to ask if he needed anything, and he's called one time since, to see how things are going. Will's pretty sure it was less a social call and more a failed attempt to get him into the lab or to a crime scene. Will didn't really give him an opening. Will's certain that if it had been one of their more active unsubs, Jack would have just talked over him until he agreed to show up wherever Jack wanted him.

Jack basically proves him right on a chilly afternoon in February. He's out on the porch watching the dogs when his phone rings, and when he sees Jack's name he almost doesn't answer. He lets it ring for a while in case it's another attempt at a faux social checkup, but when Jack doesn't give up he decides it might actually be something interesting. "Hi Jack," he says.

"Gideon's escaped," Jack says, in lieu of a greeting. There's road noise under his voice - he's either driving or being driven.

"From right under Chilton's nose?" Will asks. He shouldn't be amused, probably. Gideon is dangerous, but it would be satisfying to get to rub Chilton's face in his own incompetence.

"He was being transported to court. He sued Chilton for malpractice." Will finds himself grinning as he tucks the phone to his ear and goes inside to find his jacket and keys. "There are three people dead already. Scene's a mess. I know you're technically on leave, but I need you there, Will. We need to know what he's thinking, where he's heading."

"Text me the location," Will says, sobering a bit. "I was going a little stir crazy anyway."

Chapter End Notes

If you want to see the painting (and read my spew about it, including some more weird history) you can find it here.

Kettō

Chapter Summary

> Out of all the killers he's ever profiled, the Ripper's intended messages have always come through loud and clear.

Jack turns out to be right in having called the scene a mess - it's a bizarre mix of organized and disorganized criminal behavior. There's blood on the ceiling of the transport vehicle from the animal frenzy that had taken out the orderly and the first guard. Blood on the ground outside where Gideon had leapt out at the driver when he'd run to help the others. And then, neat detachment in the surgical removal of the organs, Ripper-like whimsy in the little vascular bows and festive presentation. It almost looks like the work of two separate players, but he knows the Ripper wasn't here. He wouldn't have wasted the organs decorating trees.

It's started snowing again, so he has to get an EMT to remove the tarps over the bodies on their stretchers. Causes of death are pretty obvious, as is the care taken in the mutilation and organ removal. "There are burst vessels in the eyes," Will points out, since there's nothing about that in the preliminary run-down Zeller gives him. It's a small detail, compared to their gaping chests and abdomens, but he has a feeling it's important. "Just the right eye. All three."

Zeller pulls out a light and a probe and starts poking around. After a minute or two he makes a noise like a startled chicken. "He lobotomized these guys. Transorbital - in right under the eyelid at the corner," he mimes the action with a finger, making a little popping sound. "Right up through the skull where it's thin at the top of the socket."

"With what?" Beverly asks, incredulous. She leaves off whatever she was collecting under the truck and comes over to examine the bodies herself.

Will turns away instead and starts walking down the shoulder of the road away from the scene, visualizing himself as Gideon. The dog team had only been able to track him about a mile before the trail disappeared, probably into a vehicle whose owner is now dead somewhere, but he'd definitely come this way.

"It's not like there would have been an ice pick in the transport," he hears Beverly saying, "let alone an orbitoclast and a mallet. What, did they stop for kebabs?"

"I don't know, but the wound goes right through the frontal bone. The instrument was thin and sturdy. I'm not seeing any debris in the wounds, either, so I don't think it was like, a pointy stick or something."

After maybe thirty yards Will spots a disturbance in the snow at the edge of the shoulder, with a partial boot-print in the muddy verge, perpendicular to the road. Will breaks from the trail and heads in that direction, looking for holes in the snow. At about fifteen feet - easy throwing range from the shoulder - he spots a glint of metal. "Got it," he calls, and motions to one of the scene techs to come flag and bag it as he crouches to look. He finds two more pieces nearby.

Jack comes over while she's still photographing. "What have you got?"

"Fancy ballpoint," Will says once he's clear to pick it up the pieces in gloved hands. "Disassembled. Ink cartridge is missing. If that was mostly metal he could have hammered it in with the missing radio or the butt of a handgun, something like that."

"Not the most precise form of surgery," Zeller points out as he joins them.

"Didn't have to be," Will says. "It's symbolic. He scrambled their brains. Actually, the fact he did kind of a hack job of it works pretty well with the theme." He looks up. "Has anybody checked in with Dr. Chilton, lately?"

Jack frowns. "I'll send someone to the hospital. What about the other psychiatrists who've worked with him?"

Alana. Will rises from his crouch. "Yeah, Jack, I think they're all likely targets, especially if he can't get to Chilton."

"Somebody get me a list, then. We'll put out protective details and hope he turns up."

Will drops his prizes into a baggie held by the waiting tech and starts stripping his gloves off for disposal. "Dr. Bloom's on that list," he tells Jack. "And more recently than most. He seemed to like her, but that's not necessarily reassuring."

"Right," Jack mutters. "Right, okay. Anything else you can tell me?"

Will thinks for a moment. "Someone at the hospital will know what kind of coat the dead orderly was wearing. You should add it to the APB."

Zeller scoffs. "What, you can magically tell he was wearing a coat that Gideon stole, but not what color it was?"

"His uniform has short sleeves," Will says, keeping his voice as flat as he can. Zeller's just embarrassed and mad at himself for missing the lobotomies on his initial inspection of the bodies - it isn't worth rising to and it won't come up again once Zeller's had a chance to cool down. Will starts walking back toward the vehicles. "I'm going to go call Alana."

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The night is uneventful. Will gets a few hours sleep in a chair in Jack's office while waiting on the autopsies of the guards and the orderly. There's been no sign of Gideon by morning, and Chilton can't be located. When the autopsies are done, they pretty much just confirm what Will already knew. They do learn the mutilations and lobotomies were done post-

mortem, in case they needed more evidence the Ripper didn't have anything to do with the crime scene.

Nothing really happens until they get a call from local PD about a doctor in Baltimore turning up dead in his office. It turns out Dr. Carruthers wrote an unflattering paper, somewhat ironically about Gideon's narcissism. Will seems to be the only one to notice the humor, though.

It's an interesting scene - Gideon did a better job this time at aping his betters, showing a little creativity. Will's always assumed the Columbian Necktie was some kind of urban myth, because of the anatomical improbability, so that's interesting. Once they get the guy open on the slab he suspects they'll find the throat has been mostly disassembled on the inside to get the desired effect. It's certainly dramatic.

He wonders if the bagged blood will actually make it to the Red Cross. It seems a shame to waste it, but it will probably be held as evidence until well after it isn't actually useable anymore.

"The blood doesn't mean anything," Will tells Jack and the others as Price and Beverly get to work sweeping the room and Zeller is supervising the removal of the body. "It's like the organs in the trees, at the last site. This whole scene, the technical skill, the effort at clinical detachment and the grasp at creativity…"

"Creativity," Jack says, sounding disgusted.

"It's like he's trying to forge a painting by an artist he's only ever read about," Will insists. "The guards at the transport, that was Gideon. The lobotomies were Gideon - that was personal. The post-mortem mutilation was him going through the motions. He wants the Ripper's attention, Jack. He wants to find him. Talk to him. He thinks it will help him figure himself out. That's why he took Lounds. Gideon knows the Ripper reads *Tattlecrime*, or at least that we think he does, or we wouldn't have had Lounds interview him before. He's a smart guy. It isn't a bad plan, except for how the Ripper is going to kill Gideon in the most humiliating way he can think of as soon as he gets his hands on him."

"That isn't going to happen," Jack says firmly, "Because we are going to find him first. With any luck, maybe we can manage to find both of them."

"So he's running around killing in *homage*," Price says, over-pronouncing the last word and rolling his neck expressively, "With Lounds as his publicity agent. Presumably at gunpoint."

"Wouldn't have to be," Zeller all but growls, "She's probably having the time of her life."

"What if we get the site shut down?" Beverly asks.

"If *Tattlecrime* goes down, Freddie's not useful anymore," Will says with a little smile. "I think we all know what happens next. Our best bet is to leave it up, as...tasteless… as the photos are, and as much as I'd love to shut Freddie Lounds down-" possibly permanently, but he definitely can't say that out loud. He meets eyes with Zeller for a moment, and he's amused to realize Zeller seems to be considering it, too. "This is a direct channel to the killer.

The article went up before they left the room, and we didn't get the call about the body for hours."

"So we monitor the site," Jack says. "We have someone on it 24/7. And we tear it apart for hidden messages. If he's trying to contact the Ripper, he might give something away hoping the Ripper will use it to find him."

"We might be able to do something on the back end," Beverly suggests. "Freddie might have tried to slip us a message - a comment in the html, a text file dropped onto the server... And if he wants her to post more, she'll have to upload from somewhere. We might be able to identify and track whatever platform she's using. If she's using cellular data we can probably trace the device, or if she's working over public wifi we could pin down her location that way."

"I'll let you talk to tech about it," Jack says, wryly, "Since I have no idea what some of that meant."

Price leans toward him, conspiratorially. "Kids today…"

"Kids today need to get moving before another body drops," Jack says, deadpan.

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When the next body does drop, Will only needs to take one look at it. Jack is still talking, but Will doesn't even hear him, staring into the distance of his own mind. "Abel Gideon didn't kill this man. The Chesapeake Ripper did."

Dr. Nahn's body looks exactly like Dr. Carruthers's. Every bit of the reproduction follows exactly from the photos and description on Freddie's blog. Only the neatly amputated arm is different. As soon as Will saw that, he knew.

It's such a contrast to Gideon's jumbled mess of presentation that Will can't help but smile to himself. Out of all the killers he's ever profiled, the Ripper's intended messages have always come through loud and clear. He's definitely a man who can communicate effortlessly in whatever medium he chooses. This particular message is so goddamned clear and elegant that it makes Will's throat tight. 'Anything you can do, I can do better,' - a two-pronged insult against both Gideon and the FBI, all wrapped up in a handout they won't be able to help but take.

"A couple of hours ago, you said the Ripper would want to kill Gideon. Humiliate and kill him," Jack says.

"Things changed," Will explains. "Gideon isn't alone, and Freddie's going to drop us a breadcrumb as soon as she gets the chance. She can only profit off this story if she survives to the end." Will rubs his fingertips over his lips, staring at the cut just above Nahn's elbow. "If he gets near Gideon, he risks exposure. So he's telling us where to find Gideon, instead."

"Telling us, how? What are we supposed to get from this?" Jack asks.

Will looks up at him. "Where's the last place you saw a severed arm, Jack?"

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"What do you think the odds are we'll find them alive?" Jack asks as they pull out of the parking lot. He's driving, following the tactical van, while Will sits beside him with his head thrown back and eyes closed.

"Freddie will be fine," Will tells him. Gideon has a use for her, and she's the right kind of weasel to stay just on the right side of his good graces. "He's going to do one of two things with Chilton - offer him up dead on a silver platter for the Ripper, or offer him up alive."

"Offer him up," Jack repeats.

"Gideon has plenty reason of his own to want Chilton dead, but he's most useful as a potential getting-to-know-you present. For Gideon, figuring out his identity is far more important right now than revenge."

"You're sure about that?" Jack asks.

"Take it from someone who's had his own problem or two with identity," Will says. "I know far too intimately what it feels like when your brain is...scrambled. If there's anything he can think of that would offer clarity, perspective, he's going to go for it. It's probably more important to him than self-preservation right now. Can't preserve yourself if you don't know who you are."

"Is that how you felt?" Jack asks, the words uncharacteristically quiet and hesitant. Will can hear the frown in his voice.

"Yeah, Jack. At the worst of it. Not as intense as Gideon's feeling it, but I definitely got a taste. If I didn't get treatment when I did, it might have been me out wandering around in the snow trying to figure out who I am."

Jack is silent, after that. They make two more turns and get onto the highway before he speaks again, obviously requiring some working up to what he has to say. "I saw Dr. Lecter a few days ago. We had him in to consult on a case, recently. While you were out. The killer was presenting with severe mental illness."

"Don't they all?" Will asks.

"Not like this. He's been working with her a lot, since we brought her in, and he's pretty sure she had no idea what she was doing at the time. I was at the hospital to get a statement from her doctors about competency to stand trial, and Dr. Lecter was reading to her, through the oxygen chamber they've got her sealed up in. Apparently he's been there a lot, lately. We got a chance to talk for a bit, so I asked him how you were doing."

Ah. Will shifts in his seat, squinching down into the angle of the door, and doesn't look at Jack. "He's not my keeper, Jack."

"Apparently he's not your anything. He said you weren't talking to him, because he'd failed you as a doctor. That he'd lost your respect and didn't see a way to get it back."

Will's head whips around to examine Jack's profile. "He didn't fail me, and he definitely didn't 'lose my respect.'"

Jack raises his eyebrows and tilts his head slightly. "He thinks he did. Pretty sure that's why he's burning the midnight oil with Madchen. Trying to make up for it, maybe."

"He doesn't have anything to make up for," Will protests. He turns to look out the window at the snowy darkness. "He didn't fail me, Jack." Quite the opposite. Hannibal had saved him. "But I'm fine, now, so there's no point wasting his time or the bureau's money on additional therapy."

It gets quiet in the car, after that. Will thinks maybe he's won, until they're pulling off the highway and Jack speaks up, again. "Doctor Lecter's never submitted a request for any kind of compensation except when he was directly consulting on a case. I assumed your insurance was picking it up and you were only stuck with the copays."

Will stares ahead into the blackness, stunned. Two visits a week, an hour each at least, plus usually at least one random drop in, whether to Hannibal's office or to his *home*. House calls for Will, house calls for his fucking *dogs*, about eight different homemade meals during his six day hospital stay and a fridge and freezer full of covered dishes and foil packets all neatly labeled with heating instructions in fine cursive on little index cards. Coffee at dawn and bread pudding at midnight, and the promise Will would always be welcome in his kitchen. He hears himself make a little sound like a hurt animal.

What the hell? Hannibal's level of care was excessive even for a doctor with the kind of hourly rates Will is sure he charges to keep the lights on in that house and office, keep himself in fine suits. The idea that Hannibal has done so much for him without any kind of compensation is frankly insane.

"Maybe he was sending invoices straight to accounting?" Will asks weakly. The alternative is nearly unbearable.

Jack sighs as he pulls the car up to park beside the swat van, at the end of the long walk up to the observatory through the snow. The tactical team have already fallen out, checking their gear with their backs braced against the truck. "My wife's seen him a few times. He's never sent us a bill for that. Said he enjoys her company too much and he'd rather be free to invite us to dinner whenever he wants."

Hannibal has invited Will to dinner exactly once. Will didn't go. Or, more accurately, he didn't stay.

Jack finishes checking his weapon and glances over at Will as he unbuckles. "I'm going in behind tactics. You stay clear, keep warm. Last thing I need is you in the hospital again."

Will rolls his eyes at Jack's back as he gets out of the car.

Hashikake

Chapter Summary

> "I was surprised to see you here at my door," he says. He isn't looking up - allowing both of them a bit of distance despite the close quarters. "You rather gave the impression you didn't intend to see me again."
>
> Will winces. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He's lost track of what time it is - not the way he kept doing when he was sick, but just because his sleep schedule has been so fucked up since Gideon escaped. It's not until he gets out of his car and looks up at the dark windows of Hannibal's house that he realizes how late it must be.

This is the worst idea. He should go home, get some sleep, and call in the morning. Ask if he can take the man out for lunch, maybe. Do this in public, where he's got the weight of other people's stares to keep his responses in check. He's halfway to the front door when he makes up his mind to leave, turning on his heel to head back to the car.

Except when he gets his hand onto the door handle all he can think is that he needs to clear this up as soon as possible or he's just never going to do it at all. He'll stay locked up in his house until Jack calls him again, and he won't run into Hannibal until something terrible and urgent is going on and Jack calls them both in. He can't stare across a morgue full of bodies at the man, both of them avoiding eye contact or conversation. He can't let the assumptions they've both made stand.

So he turns around again, and heads back to the door, this time making it all the way to the steps before covering his face in his hands and spinning again, because Jesus, what time is it, what is he even doing here. It's exactly what he's been doing, that he's been so mad at himself about, just showing up to drag Hannibal out of bed, inconveniencing him for Will's own purposes just because he happened to be at a nearby crime scene when he had his goddamned epiphany.

He laughs harshly, too-loudly, into his hands and rubs his face as he heads back toward his car, scrubbing his hands over eyes dry and itchy from the cold air and lack of sleep. He digs his keys out of his pocket, drops them, and has to crouch to locate them in the extra-black shadow his volvo is casting under the faint moonlight.

That's when the lights come on, illuminating the whole driveway. Will curses and grabs the keys before standing to turn toward the door, where Hannibal is standing in a pair of very soft

looking green pajamas, his feet bare on the cold flagstone stoop. "Will?" he asks, surprise and concern in his voice. When Will doesn't respond right away - and how could he possibly know what to say, right now? - Hannibal leaves the warmth of the doorway and starts crossing the icy driveway to him. "What's happened? Are you injured?"

"I'm fine!" Will says quickly. He raises his hands as if he can push Hannibal back into the house, but the only way to get the man in out of the cold is probably to approach him and let himself be drawn inside. He's torn between the urge to rush the man and push him back, or to just jump into his car and drive away. He's not entirely sure he might not just take off down the street at a run. He wasn't braced for this, yet.

In the end he just stands frozen until Hannibal reaches him, which is possibly some kind of metaphor for his life. "You're bleeding," Hannibal argues, and he catches Will by the forearm before he can yank himself away, pulling open Will's jacket to reveal the mostly-dry blood that Will had actually completely forgotten about. It's hard to see against the dark fabric in the dim light, but he can feel it stiff and tacky, soaked through his shirt from the level of his collarbone down to just above his belt, and it's smeared all over the lining inside his jacket where it had flapped open when Gideon threw him on his back.

"It's not mine," he says quickly, quietly, unnerved by how intensely Hannibal is examining him, eyes and hands darting quickly over his abdomen searching for wounds. "Jesus, Dr. Lecter, I'm fine-"

"Was it Alana?" He asks, words quick and clipped.

"What? No, Alana's fine, too. She's safe at home with her protective detail. Everyone's fine - well, Dr. Chilton isn't doing so great-"

"Yes, I've been playing along with the home game. I saw Miss Lounds's latest article. Other than an announcement on the television that Abel Gideon has been apprehended, though, I haven't been able to find any more up-to-date information." Hannibal seems to be calming down, but his hands are still on Will, like he needs to be sure Will is here and whole and upright. "I was terribly worried about you, Will."

"I'm fine," Will says again softly. He covers Hannibal's hand on his arm with his own, and the man's skin feels almost painfully hot under Will's icy fingers. "The blood is Gideon's. I shot him." Hannibal's eyes dart skeptically down the splash of blood across Will's front. "It was...very close range. I found his car while everyone else was rushing in to rescue the hostages, and he jumped me when I tried to arrest him. We, ah, fought on the ground until I got the gun up enough for a shot. He was alive when they put him in the ambulance...I think."

"And you're no worse for wear?" Hannibal asks.

"Split knuckles and some bruises. My bad shoulder's a little sore. Nothing a heat pad and some whiskey won't cure."

Hannibal breathes in deeply through his nose, then out through his mouth in a sigh. "Well. heat I have in spades, and some very thoughtful person recently provided me with a rather

lovely Pappy Van Winkle that I haven't yet had the opportunity to sample. Have you been out all night in just that jacket? You must be freezing."

"I was going to say the same to you," Will says as he stares down at Hannibal's bare toes turning white in the snow. He allows the other man to steer him toward the door by his arm, not pulling away from the contact. He's pretty sure this is the first time anyone has touched him, other than Gideon going for his throat, since he last left Hannibal's office.

They wipe their feet, and Hannibal takes Will's jacket. "I think I can save this. Possibly the shirt, as well. I learned a few tricks for getting blood out of clothing during my medical residency."

"The shirt has to be a lost cause," Will says incredulously, staring down and tugging it away from his body to look at it.

"Nonsense," Hannibal says. "It's very dark, and I'm very good. I'll lend you something - here, come with me to the laundry." He leads will to a narrow utility room next to the little powder room off the kitchen. There's a rolling clothing rack up against the wall with several items hanging up, and a few other things stacked folded or spread flat to dry across the ironing board and the tops of the washer and dryer. It's the most mundane, normal-person sort of disarray he's ever seen from a space under Hannibal's control, and Will has a very weird prickling feeling that tells him he might be the only person Hannibal has ever let in here.

It shouldn't be a surprise that Hannibal does at least some of his own laundry. Most people do. Then again, most people aren't Dr. Hannibal Lecter, and nearly everything Will has seen the man wear has basically screamed dry-clean-only. There's a back-mounted canister vacuum in a little niche by the door, a mop and broom hanging on the wall, and Will can't help picturing Hannibal in grubby, worn-out old clothes, vigorously mopping the enormous kitchen and vacuuming out the no-doubt-priceless rug they've just dripped on in the hallway. It's surprisingly appealing.

Hannibal starts water running in the deep shop sink in the corner. He checks the label on Will's jacket - as if Will owns anything he'd need to dry clean or whatever he's checking for - and empties the pockets without comment or examination. After placing the contents in a small tray on the shelf beside him, he holds the soiled cloth under the running stream. "I was surprised to see you here at my door," he says. He isn't looking up - allowing both of them a bit of distance despite the close quarters. "You rather gave the impression you didn't intend to see me again."

Will winces. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

Hannibal massages the cloth under the water for a while before reaching for a nylon scrub brush and going to town on the lining. "The potential deadly force encounter has changed your mind about therapy, I suppose."

"No," Will says quickly. "God, no, that's not…" Hannibal looks up at him then, eyes unreadable in the dark, and Will's mouth goes dry. "I didn't come because of that."

"Then your timing seems rather strange." He turns back to his work. "I do suppose you were in the area..."

"I came to apologize," Will says quietly. He watches Hannibal's capable hands disappear and reappear into water colored dark with blood. In the low light, it looks almost black. "For taking off like that, last time. I panicked, I think. And…for taking advantage of your friendship, all this time."

"Take off your shirt," Hannibal says without turning his head.

"What?"

"So that I may wash it, please." He looks up.

"I might as well just toss it," Will grumbles, but he strips it off, anyway. The t-shirt underneath sticks to it, also thoroughly soaked, the color rather more dramatic against the white material. He hears Hannibal's breath catch briefly as he's yanking the whole tangled mess off, but when he looks up Hannibal is studiously flipping through hangers.

"I've never felt that you've taken advantage of me," he tells Will. "I've been happy to help you when I could. I've been happy you've let me help you. I rather have the impression you haven't allowed very many people that opportunity."

Opportunity. Like Will gave him some sort of gift by falling apart on him. "No one else has ever wanted to. I thought you were just...doing your job. I didn't get it."

Hannibal finally seems to decide on a long-sleeved blue-grey shirt in soft jersey material. He holds it in front of himself for a long moment, just looking at it, before holding it out to Will. "This should be comfortable, I hope. There's a sweater as well if you're feeling chilled." Hannibal's eyes flick over his chest, and for a moment that, combined with that little stutter Will had caught in his breathing, with the tension of the moment, makes Will's own breath come a little faster in the close space of the dim room. He sways forward involuntarily, and Hannibal reaches toward him - then past his shoulder to flip on the light. In the sudden brightness Will realizes the blood had soaked right through his shirts, down to his skin, leaving his chest smeared and sticky with a thin film of red. He's been smelling it on himself since he pulled the trigger tonight, so it isn't until he sees Hannibal's nostrils flare that he realizes he probably reeks of it.

"I'm, ah, going to clean up a little before I ruin your shirt," Will says, awkwardly gesturing toward the door.

"Of course," Hannibal says. "Have you eaten?"

"What?"

"I imagine you've been running around after Gideon all day. Have you had a meal yet tonight?"

"Uh, no," Will admits. "But you don't have to-"

"Get changed," Hannibal interrupts. "I do not let friends go hungry, Will, least of all when they are a guest in my home."

He turns back to rinse the shirt in water that turns cherry red as it filters through the cloth. Will thinks about arguing, but something about the set of Hannibal's shoulders tells him he'll lose this one. He grabs a roll of paper towels off the shelf and heads for the powder room instead.

Once he's in there with the lights on he realizes there's a little blood on his pants, too. He takes them off and scrubs at the dark patch the way he'd just watched Hannibal do. For a moment, he tries to imagine what would happen if he walked back into the laundry room like this, in just his underwear. He could walk up behind Hannibal and reach past him while he works to drop the pants into the sink. Press himself to the man's strong back and feel his muscles tense or relax as he realizes how little Will is wearing. That would be an answer. Will wouldn't have to say anything, and neither would Hannibal. Maybe Hannibal would be kind enough to pretend it never happened, if the answer is no.

By the time he's presentable and dressed in the soft, clean too-big shirt Hannibal provided, Will can already smell something amazing happening in the kitchen.

"Pan-seared velvet steak with a pink-peppercorn crust, and a fresh salad of apples and beets," Hannibal says when Will comes out of the bathroom. He's wearing an apron over his pajamas and he's rolled up his sleeves, which Will can't help staring at as Hannibal tips his skillet and rotates it to splash hot fat up over the sides of the two unfamiliar-looking cuts of meat inside before flipping them deftly. "Something quick and simple."

"Oh really," Will says, amused. "On what planet is that simple?"

Hannibal raises an eyebrow. He leaves the pan alone for the moment and draws a very sharp looking knife from a block near the sink. "If you would be so kind as to take two apples - one of the yellowish ones and one of the blush - and two purple carrots and one golden beet from the bin at the bottom-right of the refrigerator? And there is half a head of cabbage on the left side of the third shelf."

Will does as he's asked, glad that Hannibal gave rather precise directions as the fridge is jam packed with produce in a riot of colors. He has to move a long package wrapped in butchers paper to find the cabbage.

He washes the items and places them on Hannibal's cutting board, then stands back to watch him work. He quickly dices apples which are tossed into the pan with the steaks, and juliennes the rest. Once the raw salad has been arranged in a colorful rainbow spray across one side of the plate and dressed with what Will thinks is probably vinegar and oil. Hannibal transfers the meat from the pan to the cutting board, shakes the pan once to distribute the apples around, and then wipes his hands on a towel before vanishing from the room.

Will frowns after him, and then frowns at the sizzling fruit. He hopes he's not supposed to have been left in charge of the meal - but Hannibal comes back just a moment later, smiling as he cracks open a very familiar bottle. Will's lip quirks, and he's about to ask what cabinet the glasses are in, when Hannibal tips a liberal splash of thousand dollar bourbon into the

pan, holds the bottle out behind him with his thumb over the mouth, and tips the skillet toward the flame so that it catches on fucking fire.

Will can't help his yelp. Hannibal turns to look at him for just a moment with a hint of teeth showing through his smile and the light of the flames reflecting in his eyes. The fire quickly burns out, and the pan's contents are poured into a blender. Soon after, Hannibal is swirling golden sauce artfully over and around the plated steaks and wiping his hands again. "Voilà."

All in all, it can't have been more than twenty-five minutes since Will left Hannibal in the laundry room. "I can't believe you set the whiskey on fire," Will complains.

"It was a gift," Hannibal says, tone arch. "I can do what I like with it. Go, sit. I'll be along shortly." He bends behind the center island and opens a small door, revealing a dozen or so wine bottles racked in some kind of specialized fridge.

"Wine, after all that?" Will asks.

"I'm not giving you barrel-aged whiskey on an empty stomach," Hannibal says. "And the ottavianello will pair better with the lean veal." He waits until Will meets his eye and winks, an action that makes heat stir in Will's empty belly. "Whiskey and heat after, once you're fed."

Once they're both seated, and after Hannibal has insisted on pouring Will's wine for him, Hannibal unfolds his napkin into his lap. "I'm afraid this isn't what I envisioned for our first proper meal together. You caught me rather by surprise, and I thought speed might be preferable to complexity."

Will scents and tastes the wine - it's a bit fruity but not sweet, a bit of peppery spice, dry but not astringent at all. It feels almost soft in his mouth when he was expecting something sharper, after the brightness of the first sip. "This is plenty complex for me." He copies the motion of Hannibal's hands, cutting one thin slice of steak and placing it in his mouth, tines of the fork pointed down against his tongue. He can't help a little sound at the taste and the texture as he chews. Hannibal had called it 'velvet steak' - Will is pretty sure he doesn't need to ask why. "You were right about the wine," he admits.

"I usually am," Hannibal says, but he sounds pleased with himself. Looks pleased to have Will at his table. "An underrated grape, the cinsaut. Often overcropped and used as filler, blended into half the cheap Zinfandels coming out of California - but when the viniculturist takes care and treats it well, it can produce something marvelously interesting and unique. This particular bottle comes from Italy, where small vintners often produce even smaller batches for local consumption. No more than a thousand cases come out of the region a year."

"That's a little poetic," Will muses in between delicious bites. Whatever Hannibal had lightly drizzled on the raw beets is ridiculously rich - something like schmaltz or rendered duck fat, maybe, rather than the expected oil. "That one fruit manages to be both mass-produced, cheap American consumer-grade and Old World rarified." The words are barely out of his mouth before he realizes the parallel. He would think it innocent coincidence at any table but this one, maybe, between any two people but them.

He catches Hannibal catch him catching it, his pale lashes fluttering down to brush those amazing cheekbones as he smiles to himself and cuts another piece of veal. "You have a better palate for wine than you think," Hannibal tells him. "I've been looking forward to crafting a meal around the Montrochet you left me when you declined my dinner invitation. I've been rather despairing any opportunity to actually get you to my table."

"I wasn't expecting all those people to be there," Will admits, ducking his head in embarrassment. He'd felt like a jerk, telling Hannibal he'd be there, seeing all the trouble he'd gone through, and then fleeing into the night. The thought of staying had been unbearable, though, and would have been even if he'd come wearing the right suit. Hannibal hadn't seemed to care how he was dressed - he'd just seem pleased to see him, as usual - but even kind, non-judgmental Alana had given him a double take when she'd spotted him in the hall and pointed him toward the kitchen.

He'd thought the invitation was just for him. He'd thought… well, it didn't matter what he'd thought - hoped for in his pathetic loneliness. He'd been wrong, and that was all there was to it. And then Hannibal had to fight for his life because of Will, coming through it battered but victorious, skin bloodied but eyes bright.

And then the reminder that Will was mad, and Hannibal was his *doctor*. He'd tended Will through his hospital stay. Gone above and beyond any reasonable person's idea of his duty to a patient. Because Will was his patient.

Cutting all ties had seemed like the only thing Will could do.

"Perhaps a more intimate invitation, then, next time," Hannibal says, voice light. He doesn't react at all when Will's fork scrapes jarringly against his plate.

"I, ah, wouldn't argue with the opportunity for another meal like this," Will tries. Hannibal smiles without looking up from the vegetables he's scooping onto his fork, so Will decides to go for it. "I've been having a lot of luck, fishing, lately. Some good steelhead. More than I know what to do with, really."

Hannibal's head comes up with a bright smile. "Bring it to me live," he orders. "I will make you sashimi." He sighs happily and leans back into his chair, his plate now nearly spotless.

Will finds himself flushing, pleased to have pleased Hannibal so easily. "I can do that."

"All I can find here is farmed. No good for anything except maybe a curry," Hannibal complains. "The wild caught fish have much better flavor, but they are illegal to sell. Not to give as a gift, though." His smile at Will is all conspiracy. "Fresh, with crab and urchin, I think, and your Montrachet. The fish will be substantial enough to stand up but not overwhelm the wine. But here I am planning the next meal before we've quite finished this one." He shakes his head and gets to his feet, collecting his plate and Will's.

On impulse, Will reaches out and snags the last bite of carrot off of his plate with quick fingers. He pops it in his mouth with a crunch, and finds Hannibal beaming down at him, apparently amused by his deliberate lapse in manners. For a moment he wonders whether Hannibal will actually call him on it, but the man just shakes his head and shifts both plates

to his left arm. He places his right hand on Will's bad shoulder, probing gently with careful fingers and frowning at the tension there. "I'll join you in the study in a moment with a hot water bottle," he says while Will tries not to shift under the touch. "And the promised whiskey."

For just a moment as he turns to go, his fingertip dips under the collar of Will's borrowed shirt. Will watches him walk away and wonders if Hannibal had felt the way Will's pulse had leapt at the touch.

Chapter End Notes

I goofed while updating and accidentally lost a few comments. I'm so sorry, y'all!

Up next, murder valentines.

Rirekisho

Chapter Summary

Self portrait of the artist, with mirror.

Will wakes to a mild headache and the sound of his phone ringing. He's wildly disoriented when he rolls over to reach for the nightstand and almost tumbles to the floor, tangled in a blanket that feels like cashmere under his inexpert fingertips. They don't make whole blankets out of cashmere, surely? Who would buy something that ridiculously expensive and self-indulgent?

He's in Hannibal's house. Has to be.

Will sits upright with a jolt and stumbles to his feet, wincing at the cold wood under his bare feet. There's just a faint sliver of light coming in between the curtains, and the glowing blue square of his cell phone rattling away on what's probably a desk if he had to judge from height alone. What's he *doing* here?

He gets a curtain open before he returns for his phone, and the visual input definitely helps him place himself in time and space. This is Hannibal's study, where the two of them had sat last night drinking amazing whiskey in front of the fire until Will was too buzzed and dozy to drive home and too pleasantly warm and sleepy to be *too* embarrassed about it. Hannibal had seemed pleased as punch to have Will crashing at his place - he'd gone up to put fresh linens on the guest bed, and that was the last thing Will remembered clearly. He'd probably come back to find Will immobile and settled for draping him in the warm blanket.

It probably is cashmere. It smells a bit like cedar and like Hannibal's cologne. Will pulls it tight around himself like armor as he answers Jack's call. "Can't the paperwork wait?" Will grumbles into the receiver.

He starts shuffling back to the couch only to freeze when Jack barks into the phone, "I've got a body here. I need you."

For a moment he thinks Gideon, and that something's wrong enough with the report for Will to be in some kind of trouble. There's only one thing that makes Jack sound quite like that, though. "Ripper?" He asks, squinting around looking for his shoes.

"I need you here. If you're not on your way to Baltimore in five minutes I'm sending a uniform to get you."

Maybe he left them in the hall. "I'm already in Baltimore," Will says, still half-asleep, and then nearly bites his own tongue at the resulting silence. "It was too late to drive home," he

says quickly. "I crashed on a friend's couch."

He's not sure why it feels like he's lying.

He finds his shoes by the front door. Finds Hannibal, perhaps predictably, in the kitchen, sitting in an armchair with a cup of tea and a tablet. "Hey," Will says awkwardly when Hannibal looks up at his approach.

"Good afternoon, Will," Hannibal says. He gestures at the tea service on the counter, complete with one extra steaming cup. "I heard you stirring. I hope you're now better rested."

"Much," Will assures him. "Your fancy couch was more comfortable than it looks." He picks up the cup waiting for him on the counter and finds it just the right temperature to take a long sip. It's hot, bitter and sweet on his tongue, just right.

"You could do with firmer support than you're used to, I think."

Will smiles into the cup. "Is that a metaphor?"

"Everything has the potential to be a metaphor," Hannibal says with a wide, slow sweep of the arm holding his teacup. "It's all in the interpretation. Would you like breakfast?" There's a bit of friendly tease in his voice, and no real judgment for the hour. "Or perhaps a late lunch."

"Sounds fantastic, but I can't," Will drains his cup, despite the heat. "Jack just called. He thinks he has a Chesapeake Ripper scene."

"So soon after the last wave?" Hannibal asks, sounding startled. "From what I've read and what you've told me, I had the impression his sprees were usually farther apart."

Will grunts and shakes his head. "Spree is the wrong word. Spree killers are disorganized. The Ripper is the ultimate highly-organized killer. I don't think something triggers him or sets him off - I think he decides when he wants to be active and when he doesn't. He isn't like the impulsive types we spend so much time chasing. I have a feeling that if he didn't want his kills found, we'd never know he exists."

"Still, it seems to be out of character, doesn't it? Is Jack sure it's him?"

Will shrugs. "I won't know until I get there. But - oh, I didn't tell you, did I? We had a Ripper kill yesterday. Pointed us at Gideon. That's how we found him."

Hannibal hums thoughtfully into his teacup. "Strange. I wonder why." He gets up. "Let me pack you a meal to take with you at least. Do you want a shower?"

"No time. Are my clothes dry?" Will starts toward the laundry without waiting for a response. He finds his jacket on a hanger, clean and dry. His shirt is laid out flat and still quite wet, traces of blood still visible though very much faded.

Hannibal follows him a moment later. "I haven't given up yet. But I'm afraid you may need to borrow something for today."

"I can go in this, if you don't mind," Will says, plucking at the soft t-shirt.

"It's snowing again," Hannibal protests. He shuffles through hangers and pulls out a thicker button-down, a dark solid blue, and a plush sweater the color of a storm. "I've put you more tea in a travel mug, and I'll throw a few things into a brown bag so you won't starve when Jack inevitably keeps you all day."

"You are way, way too nice to me," Will mumbles. Then, because that sounds ungrateful, "Thanks."

"It's no trouble," Hannibal insists. "Now. You never asked for your key back. Shall I pay your dogs a visit?"

"That's *definitely* trouble," Will protests, laughing. "Honestly, I should find a sitter or something."

"You can find a sitter later, for similar situations in the future," Hannibal tells him. "For now, if you have no time for a meal, you have no time to go looking for a contract employee. I'll visit the dogs. I haven't seen them in far too long, in any case."

Will takes the clothes from Hannibal's hands without further protest and watches him turn and go back out to the kitchen.

*

The address Jack sends him to turns out to be for a ballroom dance studio only about twenty minutes from Hannibal's house in the light weekend-afternoon traffic. He flashes his ID as he approaches the local cops milling around the parking lot, and one of them clears a path to the door and escorts him in. There's a sort of reception room or foyer, with a desk and a table holding a huge arrangement of flowers, and a set of double doors leading into the studio itself. Price is set up at the front desk, taking prints from a very fit woman in her thirties.

Since neither Jack nor a body are immediately in view, Will walks over to see what he's doing. Price looks up at his approach and thanks the woman for cooperating before waving her off. "There are visible prints *everywhere*," he tells Will. "I'm working on eliminating the instructors as they come in, but there are bound to be dozens from students, too. It's all the polished surfaces. *Gorgeous* quality."

"You know none of them will be the Ripper, right?" Will asks. "He never leaves any."

"A girl can dream," Price says, brightly. "Anyway, it could be worse. Beverly's been picking up sequins and bits of feather with tweezers for half an hour already."

"Sounds like a party," Will mutters. "Body in there?" he asks, pointing at the doors.

"Yep. It's a doozy, too. We've had two barfers already."

Will raises his eyes and mimes spinning a noisemaker in the air to indicate his excitement. He grabs a pair of nitrile gloves and heads for the doors. They're propped open a few inches, so

he doesn't have to touch the handle, and he uses the toe of his shoe to nudge one open enough to slip inside.

Bright, is the overwhelming first impression. There are three chandeliers in the large room, all ablaze, and instead of windows the walls are entirely covered in floor-to-ceiling mirrors framed inside golden arches. The floor is a golden wood, waxed and polished until it might as well be a fifth mirror. Across that glassy surface, blood spreads out from the body in a quicksilver puddle, an artful and irregular shape a bit like a cartoon paint-splat. Except it's only half of the shape. Corresponding to only half a body. Will frowns at it, tilting his head.

"Will," Jack calls from across the room, summoning him. Everyone is standing around the edges of the space, clustered toward the cleaner side of the room. Will picks his way among them even as Jack starts to shoo them toward the doors. As Will comes around the body, passing nearest the feet, he can see that the whole thing has been neatly, perfectly bisected, clothes and all, from the groin up through the top of the head. If it weren't for that, the man would look like he were sleeping peacefully, one arm folded neatly against his body, hand on his chest. The only blood on his clothing is what soaked up from the spill on the floor.

"Where's the rest?" Will asks Jack he looks the body over.

"No idea," Jack admits. "We've searched the property, surrounding buildings, I've got guys out checking dumpsters-"

He wouldn't put perfectly good materials in a *dumpster*. "What do we have, then?"

"Pretty much just what it looks like. Sliced right down the middle. Beverly thinks the guy must have been frozen, to get a cut like that."

"He didn't do it all in one go, though," Zeller butts in. "Not everything was cut down the middle."

Will frowns. "What do you mean."

"Whole heart's gone. Surgical cuts, usual Ripper MO. And then there's the digestive tract."

"What?" Will asks, screwing up his face in confusion. "He can't have taken the whole thing."

"He took a whole half-a-body," Jack says.

"That's not the same." Will crouches and turns his head to the side, examining the body. "I can see intestines. Stomach. It's all been sliced right down the middle." He looks up at Zeller, who is practically bouncing from foot to foot he's so excited about whatever he found. "What is it?"

"It's all empty. Clean as a whistle," he says, throwing his arms out to the sides. "He irrigated the hell outta this poor guy - I'll have to get the body back to the lab before I can figure out if it was done pre or post, but practically speaking it almost had to be done while the alimentary canal was intact."

Once he mentions it, Will realizes he's right. Despite the obvious abdominal wound, the split gut and intestines, there isn't a single trace of the fecal odor that usually comes with evisceration. "Interesting."

"We're still working on an ID," Jack tells him. "Prints didn't turn up anything."

"He's an artist," Will tells them. He points at the man's hand. "A painter. See, under the nails?" He'd known before he got that close, though. Known to look for the paint, or clay, or something similar, but paint seemed the best bet. He'd known from the splash of blood, and from the mirrors. He's pretty sure he knows what this is. He hasn't been able to look away since he walked in the door. "Can I get a minute?"

"We'll be outside," Jack tells him, and steers Zeller by the elbow, out of the zone of Will's awareness.

The pendulum swings, reflecting the dazzling light around them into a thousand tiny sparks, like fireflies.

*

When Jack intrudes on his awareness again, Will is sitting crosslegged on the floor, several feet from the body, staring into one of the mirrors. "You okay?"

"It took me a while to find the right angle," Will tells him. "See? From here, he looks whole."

"And that's significant?" Jack asks.

"That's the whole point. It's a very convincing show, but it's an illusion. Smoke and mirrors." He turns his head toward Jack, but his eyes stay locked on the eyes - plural - of the corpse in the reflection. "Self portrait of the artist, with mirror. It's a classic."

"Because the victim was a painter?"

"The victim doesn't matter," Will says dismissively. "That he was a painter is a nice little touch, but he's just materials. This is *him*, Jack."

"What do you mean?" Jack asks. Will can hear the frown.

"I mean, this is part of the series. He left the arm to prove Gideon was a fraud. He killed Nahn to point us to the pretender, the counterfeiter, the forger. This is him. A self portrait, as interpreted through his chosen medium." He finally manages to wrench his eyes away and glance at Jack, who is predictably scowling at the meat on the floor.

"Not a very flattering image. Can we get anything useable from this? What's he saying about himself?"

Will frowns at the mutilated chunk of flesh and turns back to the mirror, where he can see the whole picture. He's not sure it's as ugly as Jack seems to think. "All alone, in a place that implies, *requires* a partner. He's been hiding it. He's hungry for something, though. Starved."

"So he's a loner," Jack muses. "That contradicts your previous profile."

"He doesn't *look* like a loner," Will protests. "Unless you saw him from the right angle, you'd have no idea. Either one of us could meet him on the street, shake his hand, and have no idea."

Jack humphs in response. "You think he's done with this round? Seems pretty final."

Will shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe. Depends on if he has more to say." A hand appears in his field of view, breaking his line of sight to the body in the mirror. He takes it, reluctantly, and lets Jack haul him to his feet.

"You've been in here way too long. Head back to the lab. Should be a preliminary report waiting for you. We'll have a powwow once the autopsy is done and we get some of the trace results."

"Yeah," Will says, "Sure."

"And wash your face before Lounds or someone like her snaps a picture of you crying at a crime scene," Jack orders as Will walks away. It's not until then that Will notices his cheeks are damp.

*

"You look nice," Beverly says when he finds her in the concrete dungeon of the forensics lab. She has half a dozen trays laid out on a table and is sorting small items between them, some sort of catchy pop tune playing from her phone beside her. "Is that new?"

Will stops in his tracks. "What?" When she gestures at his torso, he realizes she's talking about Hannibal's clothes. "Oh."

"Little big on you, but I like the colors."

"I borrowed them," he tells her. "Didn't make it home last night."

She waggles her eyebrows. "Sounds nice. Did you come to help me catalog rhinestones?"

"That sounds amazingly tedious and is probably exactly what I need right now," Will tells her, and goes to find himself a chair.

He doesn't really feel like being alone, right now.

*

It's after six when Alana stops by. "I heard a rumor you were holed up in here," she says when Will greets her. "Think Jack would let you sneak away to the cafeteria for a bit?"

"Oh," he says, suddenly remembering. "I brought something. Thanks for reminding me. I kinda got sucked into this. I should take a break. The eyestrain is getting to me."

"Wimp," Beverly calls from behind a stereoscopic microscope. "You wouldn't last a week on fiber analysis."

"I'm old," Will complains, "I've done my time. It's your turn to ruin your eyes."

He grabs his bag lunch from the front seat of his car and meets Alana at the end of one of the long cafeteria tables. Inside the bag, he finds a packet of thinly sliced cured meat wrapped in paper, a springy-feeling golden roll, a three-inch round of soft white cheese with a pink flower on top, and what he first thinks is a strange, cream-colored apple until it turns out to be a pear. It all looks a lot better than Alana's wilted salad and pale tuna sandwich.

He peels the flower off the cheese before unloading everything, folding the bag flat to use as a plate. He's not sure why he's embarrassed by the blossom, since it's not like he has a problem with flowers, except maybe that it makes it very obvious that he didn't pack his own lunch. The cheese turns out to be salty and tart, especially where the flower left its imprint behind.

"How have you been?" Alana asks him. "We haven't really talked since you were discharged."

"Oh, keeping busy," Will says while cutting a wedge from the pear. He takes a bite and realizes Hannibal probably intended it all to be paired together - the fruit will be good with the salty cheese and smoky cured meat. He starts slicing the pear as thinly as he can so he can assemble it all into a sandwich. "I really appreciate you helping with the dogs."

"It was my pleasure. Actually, it got me thinking I should get one of my own. I haven't had a dog since I was a kid."

"I could lend you one or four," Will says, chuckling down at the sandwich he's assembling. "On a trial basis."

Alana makes a speculative face, pursing her lips and stretching her eyebrows. "Not a bad idea, actually. I'd want to be sure I could actually care for one for longer than a few days." She tilts her head a bit and looks at him from under her lashes. "Or maybe you could come with me to the shelter, help me pick one out?"

Will goes to take another bite, because the ham or whatever Hannibal packed is amazing, and then something clicks and he rests his hands on the bag again, looking at her without looking her in the eyes. "I thought I was too unstable."

Alana opens and closes her hand, then wipes them on her napkin. "I realized in the hospital that I haven't actually spent much time with you while you weren't ill. It didn't seem fair to stick to a judgment like that, made without all the relevant information."

For a moment, he's very tempted. Alana is a beautiful woman. She's soft in all the right ways, but doesn't take nonsense from anyone, which is a trait Will has always found attractive. She's kind, intelligent, nurturing. All the things he should probably be looking for in a partner.

His mind flashes, inexplicably, to the crime scene from earlier in the day. Staring down at half a man, heartless, hungry, pretending to be whole. He feels like that, sometimes, too. Terrifying, really, to think he has that much in common with the Chesapeake Ripper. It's not the first time he's felt like that, but it's definitely the strongest.

He feels like that too often to drag Alana into his world. Bad enough Hannibal seems now to be firmly planted there. He considers, for a moment, doing an experiment. Opening his mouth and just telling her, flat out, that he felt a deeper personal connection today to the Chesapeake Ripper than he's felt to any living human being in….years.

He doesn't think it would go well.

"I think your instincts are probably pretty good," Will says after a long pause. He picks up his sandwich and takes a big bite, filling his mouth and saving him for elaborating for at least a few seconds. He keeps his eyes trained on the tabletop as she folds her arms and leans forward, elbows on the table.

"Hannibal said he released you from therapy. He wouldn't have done that if he thought there was something wrong."

If he tells her Hannibal didn't want him to quit therapy, she'd probably be pretty upset. "I'll lend you a dog. Or help you find and train one. No strings or emotional investment required," Will tells her.

She hesitates over a bite of her sandwich, watching his face carefully. "What changed your mind?"

"Well, my brain isn't melting anymore," he says dryly, and then winces. "Sorry, that came out wrong. Not that I'd only like you if something was wrong with me, just that I wasn't thinking things through, then." He'd still be quite happy to kiss her again. Sleep with her. He could probably put on a reasonably convincing show of normalcy for a while, if he tried. If she'd caught him on any other day, he might have tried. "You fix damaged people. That's what you *do*. You went to school for it, you do it for a living - your whole life, that's what you've always wanted to do. And that's great - I really like and admire that about you," he tells her. "But you're never going to stop wanting to fix me. I'm not broken, or damaged, or suffering from trauma. I'm just like this. I'm always going to be like this. That probably means I'm always going to be alone, and that sucks, but it's better than you ending up hating me for not getting better, or me resenting you because I'm spending all my time and energy pretending to be something I'm not."

Alana is quiet while he finishes his sandwich. He doesn't look up again until he's licked the last bit of pear juice from his fingers and wiped his hands over the bag to get the crumbs off. When he does, she looks sad. "I don't believe you'll be alone forever, Will," she says. "I can't believe that - won't believe it. And you can't, either. That kind of thing has a way of ending up as a self-fulfilling prophesy."

"Well, if you run into anyone with the actual patience of a saint who's into guys who don't put any effort into their appearance and spend most of their time thinking about death, let me

know, and I'll give it a go," he says. She scoffs, but laughs, and looks away to gather up the detritus of her meal.

While she's focused on other things, Will takes the bright pink flower out of the paper bag and looks at it briefly before popping it into his mouth. It's far more tart than he would have expected.

Onegai

Chapter Summary

> "He's...trying to make some kind of connection. I think the last one was for me, too. He showed me something about himself, so I would understand. Then he showed me-" He swallows and hears his own throat click in the silence.
>
> "What did he show you, Will?" Hannibal's voice is so low and warm it sends shivers across Will's scalp.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's Sunday morning, about 10 o'clock, and Will is struggling to get a lid onto a 20 gallon bucket without letting anything inside it escape. He gets splashed in the face with river water, but manages to snap the plastic latch-flap into place just as his phone starts ringing across the room.

"Of course," he complains to Lucy, who wags her tail at being addressed and tries to lick the water off his face before he can stand back up. He gently bats her down and turns away, dishing out the worst punishment imaginable as far as she's concerned by ignoring her for about thirty seconds while he wipes his face and hands and grabs his phone. He's expecting Hannibal with some sort of clarification of their plans for the afternoon, so he puts the phone to his ear as he sits down, accepting Lucy's desperate attempts to earn back his good will by putting a hand on her head. "Hey," he says.

"Will," Jack says into his ear. "I've got something for you down at the Baltimore Conservatory."

Will's face screws up involuntarily into a scowl. He glares across the room at the plastic bucket. "You do remember I'm still on medical leave, right?"

"You seemed fine to me last week," Jack says. "Will, we think it might be the Ripper again."

Will sits up, startling Lucy and Winston back from where they were investigating the fascinating smells his shirt has already acquired this morning. "Again?" Damn. There go his dinner plans. Probably his plans for the next few days, such as they are. "Why aren't you sure?"

"It's a little out of pattern," Jack says. "We've got the usual surgical cuts, but there's...more. I want you to get a look at it before we make up our minds."

"Yeah, okay," Will says, getting to his feet. "I'll be there."

He hangs up, pulls on his jacket, and then calls Hannibal.

"Hello Will," Hannibal says when he picks up, voice as bright as it was an hour ago when Will had first called, on his way back to the house with a trap full of fish.

"I'm going to need a rain check," Will says into the phone. He tries to sound as apologetic as he feels. He'd been looking forward to their planned outing to that market Hannibal kept talking about, and looking forward to Hannibal's company and cooking even more. "Jack called me in. He thinks it's the Ripper again. You want me to clean and freeze these fish for you when I get home?"

"That would defeat the purpose, don't you think?" Hannibal asks, voice dry. "Perhaps I should come pick them up? Or I could meet you somewhere and take them off your hands? I promise to tend to them until you are available to enjoy our combined labors."

Will laughs, shaking his head. "What are you going to do with a couple of live trout? You know by now how this goes - Jack is going to keep me running around for days before we decide there's no actual evidence that might place a human being at the scene of the crime…"

"What a terribly pessimistic attitude," Hannibal scolds. "You have to believe you'll catch him eventually. Otherwise, what's the point?"

That might be a very good question.

"Let me assure you," Hannibal says, "I have the means and ability to keep your catch quite happily for a while. Shall I pick them up?"

"Huh? Oh, no. No, if you want them, I'll drop them off. The body's at Druid Hill. You're practically on the way."

"Really? That's quite close. I shop at the summer market there, during the season. Very good eggs."

"Yeah, so. Lock your doors tonight, okay?" Will says, feebly. It shouldn't matter, really, where the body was discovered, especially since the conservatory garden is such a well-known public place. Hannibal's house is just near the center of town, close to a lot of historical landmarks and other generally posh locations. Still, once Hannibal points it out, the knowledge makes him uneasy. "I'll see you in about an hour." He jumps as Max stumbles against his knee and presses his whole face to the leg of Will's jeans as if he's trying to absorb fish-slime by osmosis. "Er, hour and ten, I think."

*

Once Will has changed into slightly more presentable, or at least less disgusting, clothing, he makes very good time in the light Sunday traffic. Hannibal comes out to greet him while he's unloading the fish bucket from the back of his station wagon and leads him around the side of the house to a narrow gate into a yard Will never really registered was back there. He'd seen a few trees and bushes and a bit of patio from the dining room windows, but there was a lot more space than he'd expected, or at least it feels like it, the way it's divided.

There's a patio with a shaded table, a narrow cleared area with small cold-frames all in rows, maybe for a vegetable garden, and, far in the back, sheltered by stone walls on two sides and stands of bamboo on the others, a shady little nook under a bower. It looks kind of like a Japanese garden, with a few stone lanterns around a small fountain trickling into a stone-lined pool, and a leggy tree with gnarled bark Will thinks might be cherry, from the pinkish buds on its otherwise bare branches. It would be a nice place to sit and read, in warmer weather, but the only thing that looks like a seat is a bench built right into the edge of the fountain. It's wide enough for one person or maybe two people looking for an excuse for physical contact, but anyone sitting there would have their feet in the water.

"This is interesting," Will said, examining the space and the little pool. There are fish moving inside. He expects something ornamental like koi or goldfish, but as he peers into the water he doesn't see any color. "Are there lilies in the spring?" He asks as he crouches down to look at the fish, which are perhaps an inch at the longest and dull brownish-grey.

"Lotus," Hannibal corrects. "I enjoy having a supply of edible flowers ready to hand."

Will snorts. "Of course you do. You know you're going to lose some minnows if I dump these guys in here."

Hannibal shrugs. "C'est la vie. You'll just have to return for dinner before they have the chance to clean me out. If all else fails, there is a man in Virginia who would no doubt be happy to sell me more."

"If you say so," Will says. He takes the lid off the bucket and carefully tips it. The fish splash frantically as the bucket moves and the water disappears from under them, carrying them along on the short trip to their new, temporary home.

"Oh, these are lovely," Hannibal says happily, crouching next to Will. Will can't help beaming with pride - the two smaller fish are maybe four and five pounds, very respectable, but there's one big girl, probably an early spawner up from the bay judging from the size and girth. "Will, you darling boy, did you bring me caviar?"

"I suppose we'll find out in a few days," Will says, standing and turning in case the way the cold air is suddenly prickling at his face means he's actually flushing. "I've got to run or Jack will be tracking my cell and dragging me along by the ear."

*

Will has never actually been to Druid Hill Park - it's too far to comfortably bring all the dogs just for a day outing, and he doesn't really do public parks without them. It's nice enough, even now in early March, that as he drives through he has a weird little fantasy of walking here with Hannibal once the weather is warmer and things are in bloom. It feels very stupid and adolescent, but he makes a mental note to grab a spring events flyer on his way out, just in case.

The conservatory-slash-botanical garden would have been easy to spot even without all the flashing lights, the huge old glass buildings gleaming in the sun. Will has to flash his badge to get past the police line; the location is public enough that a ring of looky-loos has formed

around the caution tape barrier. Whole families out to enjoy the cool but sunny day, who maybe had intended to enjoy the gardens specifically, are instead hanging around to see what all the fuss is about. He even sees several strollers.

He's torn, feeling like he ought to be running off the clusters of children. After a moment, he shrugs it off; they're unlikely to see more than a sheet-covered shape on a gurney, and they've probably seen worse than that on TV and online. Anyway, he would have loved the chance to watch something like this, at that age.

Maybe not the best rationale for allowing it, actually. On the other hand, it might encourage a few other deeply morbid children to channel their fascination into law enforcement, which had to be better than the alternative.

He flags down a uniformed BPD officer at the door. "Get some photos of the crowd - discretely. Focus on males over 30, especially if they seem to be here alone. Clear headshots where you can get them."

"Yessir," she says with a smart little nod. She reaches for her radio and Will catches her hand.

"Stay off the horn about it - find whoever you need and keep it quiet."

"You think the guy who did this is hanging around watching and listening in?" She asks, somewhere between scared and skeptical.

Will shrugs. "Why not? I can see a dozen people wearing earbuds from here. Wouldn't be hard to find the right frequency." She still looks unsure, so Will actually looks her in the face. "If this is who we think it might be, he sees his kills as performance art. He'd love to have a front row seat, and there's enough of a crowd he might think he could get away with it."

Her mouth firms and she nods again, more thoughtful this time, before jogging off toward a cluster of other officers. Will stays there for perhaps a minute longer, casually scanning the crowd, but no one jumps out as particularly suspicious.

It's probably a long shot, but as Hannibal had pointed out, if he didn't think anything was ever going to work, what was the point of letting Jack ruin his Sunday.

He finds Jack and the others standing together in a small round garden overflowing with pink and white flowers, many with bold bullseyes of color in concentric rings. He's still wondering if that's relevant when Zeller steps aside and he gets his first view of the body.

Well, Jack had said there was something...extra. Will nudges at Zeller's back and steps closer, transfixed. The cut that removed the top of the head was done with the neat precision Will expects from the Chesapeake Ripper - the line is clean and sharp and the man's terrified face is showcased, free from blood or brain matter.

The cavity of the chest looks more like some kind of animal has burst out from inside, ribs shattered and splayed, skin ragged, fragments of bone and flesh scattered like the remnants of an explosion. The hole seems to go all the way through, because there are more of the bullseye flowers coming right up out of the chest like dandelions through a sidewalk. These

flowers have foregone the showy white and pink bands sported by the others, though, and instead are deep, solid purple-red, not the color of blood but rather the bluer tint of cardiac muscle.

"Heart attack," Price says beside him. "Pretty dramatic, right?"

"That can't possibly be your guess for cause of death," Will says absently as his eyes continue to rove over the body. The arms and legs are bound tight with loop after loop of thin string or wire, little tufts of something at intervals. Is that fishing line?

"Funny," Price says, cheerily. "The flowers. These are all D. barbatus, but those red ones are called "heart attack" according to the lovely young man who had the misfortune of opening up this particular greenhouse, this morning. Came in to water or whatever before the doors opened to the public and nearly had a heart attack of his own."

Will frowns down at the body, not sure what to think. Dramatic, yes, definitely, but if it's the Ripper Will's not sure yet what he's saying. Will walks slowly around the body as Jack starts running technicians out of the room. The head is propped up on a flat rock, enough to keep the empty bowl of the skull from tipping out the handful of greyish-black ash, inside. Removed the brain, burned herbs in the skull, maybe for purification or-

His eyes dart briefly to the edge of the garden where a discrete grey plaque on a spike identifies what's growing in the bed. *'Dianthus barbatus'*, it says in italics, and under that, in bold text, 'Sweet William."

Will slams into Beverly as he back-pedals, and it takes Jack and Price combined to keep them on their feet. Will is barely aware, his vision narrowing to a tunnel surrounded by dark, telescoping out until all he can see is what this body would have looked like when the Chesapeake Ripper put it here for him, fire blazing inside its skull. "It's me," he gasps, "'it's me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jack barks. Will thinks he must take too long to answer, because his teeth rattle as the man gives him a shake. He barely misses snapping right through his own tongue.

"Tangled up in trap lines, brain on fire," Will blurts, half in a trance, "heart exploding with someone else's blood-"

"Whoa, whoa," Jack says. He drags Will away, and someone else steps in to help him, breaking Will's line of sight with himself. Will gasps and jerks like someone's just pulled him off a live wire.

He's dimly aware that he shouldn't be breathing so fast or hard - there are sparks shifting in the black at the edges of his vision - but he just wants Price to move so he can see. He struggles against Jack's hold, trying to get another look around his shoulder.

"Fuck," Jack mutters, and then he's bellowing next to Will's ear, making him jump. "Where the hell is Zee?"

"Here," Zeller says. He gets right up in Will's face as Jack lowers him to the ground, a determined set to his mouth, and forces an oxygen mask over Will's face despite his struggling.

Even then, it's a while before Will manages to calm down, completely.

*

They won't let him near the body.

This is doubly frustrating, because they won't let him leave, either. Someone - Beverly, he thinks - stole his car keys and wallet. So he's stuck in the Brutalist concrete hell of the forensics lab, parked in an uncomfortable chair in the corner, while Zeller is busy with the autopsy on the other side of the wall.

'He made it for me,' he wants to snarl. But he's pretty sure that's exactly the thing to say if he wants off this case entirely.

That's probably a good idea. He ought to want off the case. The Chesapeake Ripper knows him - knows his name, his hobbies, his medical history. The encephalitis ended up on tattlecrime, but to know about the fly fishing he probably has to have followed Will, or at least cased his house. He should be terrified for his own safety, but mostly he's concerned that the Ripper probably knows about his dogs.

"What's this one?" Beverly asks beside him. She holds up one of the flies they pulled off the body, held in a pair of slim tongs, and points at the knot she means with her pen.

Will doesn't even need the magnifier. "Improved clinch," he says. His lips twitch, so he licks them. "A little weird, maybe. Most people would probably use a turle knot, I think?"

"You think?" she asks, sitting the fly back down on her tray. "You're supposed to be our pro fishing nerd."

"Hey, I just do it," Will defends. "Occasionally pick up a magazine. I don't actually socialize with other anglers. I only talk about fishing with someone if they're selling me gear."

Except for Hannibal, maybe. Not that Will has gone into depth about knots, or anything. Hannibal's most interested in the end result, and maybe the peace of mind Will finds in the stream. He'd broached the idea of tagging along next week or the one after, not to fish but to look for spring mushrooms and maybe ramps if they were lucky. He'd joked about training Buster to dig for truffles - joked, Will *thinks*, about seeding Will's little patch of woods with truffles in the first place, which to Will's understanding would be a pretty serious investment of money that wouldn't show results for years. Time enough to train a dog, together.

He shakes his head.

"Turle's an older knot. One of the basics, the classics. You learn turle from another fisherman. That knot came out of a book."

Beverly makes a considering noise and a quick note. "I know this feels like busywork, but you've got a lot of insight here no one else on the team has. We have an expert on flies but not flies."

Will sighs. "I know. I know, it just… this feels personal. I want to be in the loop."

"A madman murdered you in effigy. Personal is a word for it."

That wasn't quite what Will meant, but he nods anyway. "The team poring over my house today didn't help."

"It's a cute place," Beverly offers. "I didn't know you had so many dogs. I mean, I'd heard you had dogs, but you have a lot of dogs."

Will snorts. He turns Beverly's magnifier toward himself and picks up one of the flies she's done documenting at the top level. He frowns. "This looks familiar."

"I don't know how you can tell them apart," Beverly complains.

"You can tell carpet fibers apart,"

"Carpet fibers are very distinctive," she mutters.

"Think of these like little prepackaged bundles of trace evidence," Will says. "Can you hand me that blade?"

She frowns as she hands it over, then watches him gently work the head and center joint open, taking the whole thing apart. He picks up a reddish-pink feather with a pair of tweezers, turning it under the light.

"What?" Beverly asks.

"Crossbill feather," Will murmurs, "split down the shaft. I only needed half for the fly I used it in."

"This isn't one of yours," Beverly corrects absently, and then her head snaps around.

"Yeah," Will says quietly. "I know. Can we check it against my gear? Thread too, maybe - I had a lot of this dark green left from something but I couldn't find the spool the other day."

"He's been in your house," Beverly hisses. "When we couldn't find any sign of forced entry, I thought - Jimmy needs to know, he's still going over the prints."

"He never leaves prints," Will says with a bitter smile. "Well, so much for going home at some point tonight. I was really looking forward to -"

His phone rings, and he breaks off to check the screen. When he sees Hannibal's name he jumps to his feet. "Sorry, gotta-"

"I'll call Jack and fill him in. You need a protection detail."

"Oh god, no, don't," Will protests on his way out the door. "Wait till I'm back to defend myself, at least."

He takes the call in the hall, still walking as he looks for a more private spot. "Hey."

"Hello, Will. Have you managed to make it home for the evening?"

"What? No." Will leans against the wall outside the empty toxicology lab and runs his hand through his hair. "I mean, yeah, earlier, for a bit, but I think I'm here all night."

"Unfortunate," Hannibal says. "Did you manage to find a dog sitter, or should I drop by?"

"No!" Will all but shouts. Someone's footsteps are coming around the corner, so he pitches his voice lower and ducks into the empty lab. When he shuts the door it leaves him in darkness broken only by a few LED indicators and the glow of his phone. "Don't go to the house. I can't see you for a bit."

There's a long pause on the other end. "If I've done something-"

"No, no," Will interrupts. He winces and drops his voice to just above a whisper. "I need you to not be...connected to me. Okay? For a while."

"Will, what is going on?" Hannibal demands, sounding so much like a stern parent that Will can't help a choked laugh.

"I don't want to worry you. Just…. We may have reason to think the Chesapeake Ripper's, uh, taken an interest in me."

Absolute silence on the line. Will leans back against the wall and slides down to sit on the floor. He's so damned tired.

"Are you alright?" Hannibal asks.

"Define alright?"

There's a sigh. "Are you at the labs or offices?"

"Labs. Probably all night."

"I'm coming to you." Hannibal sounds determined, concerned.

"No," Will hisses. "No, Hannibal. You can't, okay? He's been watching me, he's been in my house-"

"Will-"

"The body this morning was some kind of effigy or-" he breaks off, staring into the dark room. "It wasn't a threat, I don't think. I told Jack it was a goad, meant to poke at him, like Lass's arm. That the Ripper was trying to piss Jack off and maybe scare me off the case."

"But that's not what you think." Hannibal's voice sounds so close in the void of the dark room. Without a point a reference, he could be speaking right into Will's ear.

He closes his eyes and imagines it, imagines leaning back against Hannibal's chest, his breath on Will's nape as it had been in his waiting room before Will tried to walk out of his life. He should have stuck to his guns.

"No," he admits. "He's...trying to make some kind of connection. I think the last one was for me, too. He showed me something about himself, so I would understand. Then he showed me-" He swallows and hears his own throat click in the silence.

"What did he show you, Will?" Hannibal's voice is so low and warm it sends shivers across Will's scalp.

"I don't want to tell you," Will admits. "I shouldn't have told you this much."

"Why?"

He has to stop, squeezing his eyes shut against the dark and hugging his knees to his chest. "Because I really like having a friend," he confesses, voice small and weak. "I like having you for a friend."

"Have I given you a reason to believe my friendship is fickle?" Hannibal asks. The words could be accusatory, but the tone is comforting. Will is supposed to know the answer. "My regard is not easily given; I won't be taking it back, no matter what you say now."

"You can't possibly mean that," Will whispers into the dark hollow between his knees.

"I do. Will, there is nothing you could say or do to make me care for you any less. If I can convince you of nothing else, please believe you will always have my friendship and respect."

Will breathes in awful, wet gasps, struggling to get his throat and lungs under conscious control. He feels like his body is as reluctant to let go of the words as his mind is, but Hannibal has a way of drawing truth out of him. It was incredibly effective as a therapist, and it's painfully devastating, now.

"It felt like an honor," he chokes out. "I felt - I felt like someone finally *saw me*. Understood and accepted me. Like I *wasn't alone.*" He sobs once, then manages to swallow the next one. "That's terrible, isn't it? I mean, terrible in so many ways, more ways than I can count, but terrible to you, after what you just said-"

"You believe there is some part of you that this killer sees and accepts, perhaps admires - something you prefer that I not see because you fear it will drive me away."

God damn Hannibal and his perfect fucking insights.

"I'm not a good man," Will confesses with his eyes squeezed shut. "You ought to run far and fast from me."

"What is a good man?" Hannibal asks. "Is the definition based on impulse? Inclination? Or on actions?"

"A good man would have asked that *victim's name*," Will hisses. "A good man would have been frightened today, not exhilarated."

"You were not frightened for your own sake, but you were frightened for mine," Hannibal says gently. "That means something, Will. You are capable of caring for others. One might make a reasonable argument that you care too much. You tear yourself apart to protect strangers. You worry about your humanity - something I assure you monsters do not do. You pamper your lost and abandoned dogs, and this morning you ventured into the pre-dawn frost to bring me fish because you knew it would make me happy."

Will's breathing gradually slows as he listens to Hannibal's assurances. His chest still feels tight, but in a different way.

"Frankly, Will, I don't care if you're a good man," Hannibal finally says. "You're someone I want in my life, in whatever capacity you'll have me."

Oh god. Are they having this conversation now? Really? After everything that's happened today? After everything Will's said tonight?

Will still has a hard time wrapping his head around the idea that Hannibal even enjoys his company. He doesn't know what to do with the man's aggressively unconditional declaration of affection. He presses his hand over his own mouth and blinks at the dark room, trying to process the last few minutes, to evaluate.

He's always wanted the trappings of normalcy. The wife and kids, the dogs, the picket fence. But he's pretty sure there aren't actually any picket fences in his future.

This… As improbable as it seems, maybe he can have *this.*

"In what capacity do you *want* me to have you?" he manages.

Hannibal chuckles low and dark into his ear, his voice making Will shiver and his hair stand on end. "Ask me again when you next come to dinner."

Chapter End Notes

The little fish in Hannibal's pond are "doctor fish," which are known for eating human flesh. But in a nice way.

Tantei

Chapter Summary

> "It's still bodies. Brains and bodies. Associations, experiences. Like training pigeons. You wine and dine somebody, feed them things that taste good, give them presents, take them nice places, give them all the orgasms, make them associate your company with something pleasant." She tilts the near-empty soju bottle. "And booze never hurts."
>
> "Is that why he keeps trying to feed me?" Will asks. He sounds plaintive even to his own ears.

The lab is bustling when Will gets back. Zeller's been pulled off the autopsy and there's an agent who might be from genetics fussing around the trays where it looks like the rest of the flies have been disassembled.

"Where the hell have you been?" Jack demands. He advances on Will, who just stands in the doorway staring at the man's chin, his own jaw set. "You can't go running off like that."

"I took a phone call and a piss break," Will complains.

"You were gone for over an hour, without telling anyone where. Knowing who's after you -"

"We don't know he's 'after me,'" Will protests. "Jack, I was across the hall. I never left the building. I just…" he sighs and pushes back hair still damp from a dunk in the sink. "I needed a few minutes. This is a lot."

Zeller steps casually into the space between him and Jack, doing a lot to break the tension. "You don't know the half of it," he says. "Come see what Bev found."

The genetics guy - Harris? - nods at him as he approaches the long table everything is spread out on. He has a stack of small evidence bags in one hand. "I'll rush it through," he says to Beverly, then heads for the door where Price is slipping back inside.

"Priority one," Jack tells him as he goes. "You don't touch anything else until we have IDs and you don't say a word to anybody."

"Got it, sir," the agent says, looking like he wants to salute or something. Jack dismisses him by turning away to join the rest of them at the long table.

Each of the ten lures has been disassembled, the pieces separated out onto ten trays. Will's eyes dart over them, taking in as much as he can. There's a red sequin in number three that he and Beverly thought might match something from the studio where they'd found Caleb

Crane, and a few other recognizable bits of things. His crossbill feather, some bits of cloth. When he gets a good look at five and six, he yanks the magnifier over. "Is that human hair?"

"We think so," Jack says.

"Beverly spotted it," Zeller explains. "I heard her shouting 'eureka' all the way in the morgue-"

"I did not," she shoots back. "Look, there's more, though. Once we had the idea to look for it-" she gestures to a different one. "Smooth muscle. Brian thinks intestine-"

"Lots of capillaries," he offers. "And number five definitely has lung tissue. Nothing else looks like that under the scope. They nearly all have recognizable tissue."

Will moves over the trays slowly, one by one, examining all the individual bits. When he reaches the end of the table he stands back and closes his eyes.

"Will?" Jack asks.

Shaking his head and holding up a hand, Will takes a deep breath and tunes them all out in favor of visualizing the Ripper's gift. He maps out the placement of all the little barbs, hooks pressed into flesh, line strung between and wrapped around and around, binding up the body.

That lone red sequin from the self-portrait pinned above the heart. The lure hooked through the tongue had to be Carson Nahn. A constellation across the abdomen, bowel for Christopher Word, one at the small of the back for Andrew Caldwell's kidneys.

Two with strands of long, dark hair piercing the back, tissue from Cassie Boyle's lungs pinned between the shoulder blades, and Marissa closer to center of mass. The thin splinter of bone there will turn out to be antler, he's sure.

"The Shrike Copycat," he says quietly. "It was the Ripper the whole time." When he opens his eyes everyone is staring at him in shock.

"He followed you to Minnesota?" Zeller asks, sounding horrified.

"No." Will shakes his head. Surely not. "I wouldn't have been interesting until I started investigating him. Until Cassie Boyle." He frowns at number seven, hooked through the tender skin just inside their victim's elbow. "She's probably the earliest victim represented here, besides one. The numbers add up, if we assume Nick Boyle is dead, too."

"Why the Copycat kills at all, then?" Price asks. "That was so far outside his usual area."

Will shoots Jack an apologetic glance. The man has a stricken look on his face. "Poking at Jack, I think. It was pretty widely publicized that he was directly involved in the Shrike case." He leans over and taps tray number seven. "What did you find from Agent Lass?"

Jack winces like he's just been hit with a very small electric shock and is trying not to show it.

"Nothing suspicious in that one so far," Beverly says. "Seems to be normal. No tissue, just bark, shell, beetle wing, paper. And your feather."

A chill runs up Will's spine. "A red flag." He stares at it. Stares at the component parts. "What's with the paper? That's odd."

"Graphite on it," Price says, "like pencil, I'd assume. Nothing recognizable on just that little strip, and it's smudged all to hell. It's been wet. There hasn't been time to process it further, but Bowman's on his way in."

Will looks at the feather under the magnifier again, at the way the downy fluff at the base of the shaft is clumped and the barbs of the afterfeather are entangled. "The feather's been wet, too. The whole lure was dunked." He shakes himself all over, trying to rid himself of gooseflesh. "We have to focus on this one."

"You think it will lead us to Miriam's body," Jack says quietly. "Okay." He's silent for a moment. "Okay. But we can't shift focus so completely we lose sight of something else. No one wants to bring her home more than I do, but if we miss something else…"

"Cassie Boyle," Will says, pointing to the trays as he goes. "Hair and lung. Marissa Shur. Dr. Carson Nahn. Caleb Crane. All dead, all with bits of tissue from the bodies." He points at tray number seven, the one without any of Miriam Lass's mortal remains. "This one - no tissue. And no body found."

"This is crazy," Jack says flatly.

"Maybe." Will is unable to entirely help the little twist of a smile trying to creep onto his face, but he's doing his best. "We have to treat it as a possibility, Jack."

"Wait," Price asks, incredulous and horrified. "Are you saying you think he's had her *alive* all this time?"

"Oh, fuck," Beverly whispers, sounding sick.

"That's nuts," Zeller tells him, suddenly angry. "That's *impossible!"*

Definitely improbable. Ridiculously difficult.

No one's ever tried so hard to impress Will, before. It feels…

Good. Terrible. *Good.*

*

It's the lure that leads them to her, after 36 hours of nonstop work; diatoms specific to a patch of northern Virginia, caught in the fine mesh of the feather, a sliver of reddish-orange bark from a tree native to the Pacific Northwest. They end up combing a few square miles, mostly woods and a couple of farms. Jack is the one who finds her, sitting in six inches of water at the bottom of a well in the dark basement of an old work barn. Will doesn't think Jack has been out of sight of her since, and he's sitting beside her in the hospital now.

"I can't believe it," Beverly is muttering into her drink. She'd dragged them along for noodles and beer at a place nearby that she knew would still be open. That had quickly turned into noodles and soju, until Zeller had apologized earnestly for a solid five minutes for thinking Will was such a weirdo, then fallen asleep at the table. Price had volunteered to get him home, and the two techs who had tagged along had skedaddled soon after. "Two years. That's horrendous."

"She's in good shape, physically," Will offers. He's stuck with Beverly as his chaperone until she takes him back to the trainee dorms where he's supposed to crash, but there are worse places to be. He's decided he likes the place despite how loud it is - no one is trying to make eye contact while he's busy drinking. "Other than the arm, I mean. Not so much as a bruise on her. She was dehydrated when we found her, but not malnourished. I think he put her in the well within the last few days, specifically so we'd find her."

"It doesn't make sense," Beverly tells him. She shoots her drink back, then kicks him under the table and holds out her glass for Will to refill. "He's been so meticulous about physical evidence for years - eighteen suspected victims now without a hair, a fingerprint, a shoe scuff, a clothing fiber, not a damned thing, and he drops this orgy of evidence on us - and then a whole *living person* who can testify against him and everything."

"She hasn't had much to say so far."

"I don't blame her," Beverly says. "There's a part of me that hopes, for her sake, she's blocked everything out, from the moment he nabbed her. That's nuts, I know - she's literally the only known witness of the worst serial killer currently at large. We have to hope she knows everything. But it's just so cruel."

Will sips his drink slowly so he won't have to answer. When it's empty, he scrapes more chili paste and green onions into his noodles and digs in.

"I have never seen a white boy eat so much gochu-jang," Beverly says, sounding impressed.

"Which thing is that?" Will asks, examining his mess of a bowl.

"The hot red stuff you keep adding. I should bring you home to my mother. Saul's from Nebraska; he's, like, allergic to flavors." Beverly reaches across him, despite his half-hearted attempt to elbow her, and tops his glass up.

"God, stop, this stuff is wicked."

"You have to drink it," she sing-songs at him. "Otherwise it's rude."

"You know, I've had soju before, but it wasn't like this."

"Eh." Beverly waves a hand. "The stuff they export just for Americans, yeah. It's about half strength. Something to do with taxes I think. I don't fuck around if I can help it. Kind of like you and hot seafood, apparently."

"I was born sucking heads and pinching tails," he says agreeably, and smiles to himself when she chokes into her drink. "Crawfish," he clarifies when she just stares at him, bug-eyed, after her coughing fit.

There's a lot of stuff he doesn't miss about the gulf coast. The food, though, he misses like hell. He wonders if Hannibal has any Cajun recipes - not the fancy Frenched-up dishes like the pricier New Orleans restaurants, but stuff like boudin balls and dirty rice. He tries imagining the face Hannibal would probably make if Will showed up in his kitchen with a sack of Slap Ya Mama boil and his best puppy dog eyes.

"You had me going for a bit," she says once she's breathing okay again. She wipes her face with a napkin and seems to give up on the booze in favor of her own food. "I thought maybe you'd been holding out on me."

Will sips from his own drink, pondering. "Are we the kind of coworkers who talk about stuff like that?" He's probably crossed past tipsy into drunk, if he's even considering it.

She shrugs. "We could be. I told you about my whole *situation*. Why, you got something going on worth talking about?"

Will doesn't answer right away, trying to make up his mind. Which, from Beverly's expression, suggests pretty well that there's *something*. He figures he's lost deniability already. "Maybe."

"This about Dr. Bloom?" She asks, leaning in closer and lowering her voice. At his questioning look, she smiles. "I caught her staring at your butt a while ago."

Will wipes his mouth to hide what his mouth is trying to do. "Ah. No. That's, ah. I mean, we… that's not going to happen." He stares at his drink, suddenly pensive.

"So this is the other set of prints," Beverly says with some finality, and leans back in her chair. Then her eyebrows go up. "Holy shit, wait, you're dating a guy?"

"What?" Will asks as the bottom drops out of his stomach. "What are you talking about?"

"There were only two sets of prints in your place, other than yours. Dr. Bloom's were on file from her teaching application at the academy. Jimmy thought the other set must be from a guy, because of the handspan. The prints were everywhere - all over your kitchen, on your piano keys, even. He was going to ask you to exclude whoever it was." Her face darkens abruptly. "Unless you don't know who it is, in which case-"

"No, no," Will says quickly, "I know who it has to be." Hannibal's played his piano? Really? Probably while he was dog-sitting, but really? Will hopes it's still in tune, he hasn't touched it in ages.

"So?" Beverly asks.

"So, what?" Will asks her. "I never said I was seeing somebody." He picks the last shrimp out of his bowl and pops it into his mouth before chasing the last few noodles and bits of

kimchee around the bowl.

"You said maybe!" she accuses.

"I said maybe because I don't know," he admits. "We haven't talked, really. But, uh, some stuff was said." Fuck, avoiding pronouns is hard. He's never actually *dated* a guy so it's never been an issue. He eyes Beverly for a second before making up his mind. "He said some stuff. That made it sound like maybe he was... interested. Maybe really interested."

Beverly plants her elbows on the table and leans into his space. "Are *you* interested?"

Oh god. His interest is so not the point. "I haven't been on a date in six years," he blurts. Beverly stares at him. He winces and looks away. "I haven't...been on a second date in about ten," he finally adds. To avoid her gaze, he picks up his bowl and slurps down the last few swallows of the broth. It turns out to maybe be a mistake, when the chili hits the back of his throat. He coughs hard before draining what's left of his soju and fighting to make his lungs cooperate. Beverly slides him her forgotten beer, and he drinks it gratefully, hunching over and fighting the urge to wipe the tears from his eyes for fear of getting pepper in them. He motions at himself and the way he's curled up. "Such a surprise, right? Catch like this."

"I dunno," she says, smirking. "I'm a little surprised. You're good looking. Employed. Have cute dogs. You're good at reading people." She shrugs. "If you could turn down the 'I hate everybody, don't talk to me' vibes I think you could make out pretty good on a Saturday night. If nothing else, 'accidentally' flashing your FBI badge while laying down a tip is a pretty slick move. Gets attention."

"Picking people up isn't the problem," Will admits. "Not with strangers I'm never going to see again. I tried that, some. Got bored. I'm pretty good at it, though, if I'm trying."

"Oh really? So, what line would you use on me, Romeo?" Beverly teases. "Strictly hypothetically."

He leans his elbow on the bar and squints at her, too drunk now to remember to keep his eyes off her face. "I'd pick a fight with you about your shitty taste in beer," he says, flicking the empty bottle with one finger. "Then I'd ask you to pick one out for me, and change my mind. Concede gracefully."

"You asshole," she snickers. "Oh my god, you complete asshole. Do not ever tell Saul-"

"I've never even met Saul."

"Do not ever tell Saul, but that would probably have worked. If I didn't know you, I mean."

"If you didn't know me," Will says, bitterly. "That's the problem. I don't actually care much about the physical stuff."

"It's all physical stuff, though," Beverly tells him with the intense, earnest seriousness of the drunk. "Even if you're not talking about sex, bodies matter. Attraction is a physiological process. You give somebody a warm drink to hold, and they like you better than if you hand

them a cold one. There are studies." She says that last as if it has grave importance, like some kind of scriptural edict. "Either someone makes your heart race, or they don't. That's why the argument thing would have worked - if your heart is pumping and you're breathing fast, if your skin is flushed, your body doesn't know if you're angry or scared or horny until your brain decides."

"That's fine in the moment," Will concedes. "I'm talking about a deeper emotional connection, though."

"It's still bodies. Brains and bodies. Associations, experiences. Like training pigeons. You wine and dine somebody, feed them things that taste good, give them presents, take them nice places, give them all the orgasms, make them associate your company with something pleasant." She tilts the near-empty soju bottle. "And booze never hurts."

"Is that why he keeps trying to feed me?" Will asks. He sounds plaintive even to his own ears.

"No, you just radiate waves of 'would-starve-if-left-to-own-devices'," she says, grinning. "That's why I brought you to my noodle place."

It makes sense for him to fall for Hannibal - of course he would - but why the hell is a man like him even interested in Will? By Beverly's logic, which seems very sound at the moment, it makes even less sense than usual. Will's never taken Hannibal anywhere nice. He's only ever brought him to crime scenes.

"I don't know what to do," Will admits. "I don't even know why he likes me. I think we were maybe supposed to go on sort of a date, but then Jack called me in for the Ripper." He lowers his voice and leans closer to her. "The Ripper. He's been watching me. Following me around. Learning about me like I'm learning about him. I think he likes me, too." He laughs and covers his face with his hands, because *that one* makes a lot more sense.

"You should take the protective detail," she tells him, seriously. "You should do like Jack wants and go home with the sniper and everything."

"I'm not bringing the dogs into the middle of that," Will tells her. "And if the dogs aren't there, he'll know it's a trap. He's really smart, Beverly. I think he's probably smarter than all of us." He stares at his empty glass and considers refilling it himself, and damn the protocol of the place. "He kept Miriam Lass for two years."

Beverly's frowning at him when he looks up. "Yeah."

"Do you think he'll keep me that long?" Will asks. His vision is blurring a little, so he blinks a few times.

"Jesus, Will. What-"

Both their phones start ringing more or less simultaneously. They stare at each other.

"Fuck," Beverly finally says. "That's not good."

Will pats himself down, trying to remember what pocket he put his phone in, while Beverly flags down a server to settle their bill.

Shashin

Chapter Summary

"I don't see empathy here," Jack protests. "I see torture, I see carnage."

"Empathy doesn't have to mean sympathy," Will says.

Jack thinks about that for a moment. "Good," he finally says. "You'd be in some trouble otherwise, I guess."

"Probably," Will agrees.

(See end-notes for a chapter-specific, somewhat spoilery warning regarding consent)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Baltimore again. Druid *fucking* Hill again, and if Beverly weren't in the back of the squad car with him Will would be calling Hannibal, right now, and damn the hour. As is, he sweats uncomfortably, shirt sticking to his back, and thanks the officer driving them profusely for his offered stick of peppermint gum.

"You look wrecked," Beverly tells him cheerfully. She's wedged in sort of sideways against the door, scrolling rapidly through something on her phone. "Jack just got there. Says it's a mess."

"It's always a mess," Will mutters. And then, hands pressed to his face and shoulders held painfully tight, "do they have an ID?"

"Not that he's said." Will relaxes slightly. If Jack's seen the body, surely he'd have mentioned if it were someone they all know. "He sent me directions."

"Why do we need directions?"

He finds out when they get there. They move past the flashing lights and brightly painted signs, under the watchful eyes of curious and agitated animals, and follow Jack's text beyond the restricted signs. Apparently, some parts of the Maryland Zoo haven't been open to the public in a long time.

Will can see why. The iron cages set on concrete slabs are harsh, uncomfortable, antiquated - far too small for anything like humane treatment of the animals on display. The Victorian architecture makes the place look like some kind of abandoned outdoor prison, especially now in the dark. Will can hear some kind of animal making a strange, high growling sound nearby - whatever it is, it can probably smell the blood.

"They used to keep tigers here," Beverly says, gesturing at an enclosure as they pass. "When I was really little. I think some of the animals died or something. I didn't know all this was still here."

Will can see it, in his mind's eye, the huge animal pacing restlessly in her too-small cage. The door hangs open now on one rusted hinge, and the bars are half-covered in creeping kudzu.

They follow the glow of portable floodlights and the noise of activity to a sort of focal area with a round iron cage in the center, perhaps a bit bigger than Will's living room. There are cops and zoo personnel clustered around it, and Will can see FBI jackets inside including, once he looks for him, Jack's broad back. This close, Will can smell the blood that's setting the animals off, unusually foul mixed as it is with the ammonia-stink of old carnivore waste. While Beverly pushes through the people to catch Jack's attention, Will plants himself off to the side and observes the general scrum.

The scenes the Chesapeake Ripper leaves behind don't usually come with the drama of inter-agency politics, the tension and sometimes sparks between state and local police, between federal and state. Everyone always wants to know what's going on, and hopes they'll be the ones to solve this, but they're happy to cede responsibility to the FBI. Nobody else wants the Ripper on their docket, racking up unsolved murders and awful PR.

Now that he's stopped moving, his damp shirt is cold and clammy against his skin. Will mops at his face with his jacket sleeve and thinks idly of how handy a tidily folded pocket square would be right now. Not that he'd want Hannibal to see him like this, drunk at a crime scene, unwashed in two-day-old clothes. Though, if Will hasn't driven him off before now...

"You two smell like a brewery," Jack complains when he emerges from the cage.

"I *wish* I just smelled like a brewery," Will mutters. "It's three AM, Jack. We were off duty. After nearly 48 hours on."

Jack sighs. He doesn't look so great, either, now that Will's thinking about it. He's changed clothes since they pulled Lass out of that cistern, but that might be all he's had the chance for.

"How's Miriam?" Will remembers to ask.

"Processed through forensics and sleeping the sleep of the drugged. Hospital's keeping her for dehydration and further evaluation."

Beverly shakes her head. "Poor kid. They get anything useful off her?"

"Not so far," Jack rubs his hands together and looks around. "And now we've got this to deal with. I hate feeling like this bastard is a step ahead of us."

"Don't let Freddie hear you talking like that," Will admonishes, even if he privately thinks it may be more like two or three steps ahead. When Beverly offers him a pair of gloves from a little bag in her purse, he raises his eyebrows at her before putting them on and shouldering his way past a local PD officer blocking the entrance to the round iron cage.

He has to push past two other people in the claustrophobic space before he gets a good look at the body. "Cage inside a cage," he murmurs. The press of people moving around him fades to a sense of dull but insistent pressure, their voices to a wall of meaningless noise. He's alone now with what the Ripper left him.

At the center of the large cage, there's a smaller, cruder enclosure - a cube of iron bars less than a yard on each side. Between the bars he can see the body of a man, uncomfortably folded. He's been beaten to a pulp - not the Ripper's MO. Will might have suspected someone different, if it weren't for the elaborate staging and the way the corpse is reaching through the bars for the human heart in the feeding trough.

That's a lie. Will's pretty sure he'd recognize the Ripper anywhere, by now. He crouches down to peer at the man's wounds - skin bruised and split like overripe fruit, bones shattered. It looks like he'd battered himself against the bars until his body broke, like some kind of mad bird. The fishing-line sutures stitching closed the Y-incision in the man's chest would have given away the connection between this and the last murder, even if Will hadn't immediately recognized the muse as himself.

He keeps his mouth shut, this time. If he makes a scene, Jack will have him dragged out again. The constraint feels like the bars of the cage, pressing around him and forcing him into shape. He tries to ignore it as he stares into his own face through gaps in the iron panel. The heart will be missing, and probably the tongue, judging from the blood around the mouth.

This is him. This is *for* him. The last body had been as clear as a snapshot, a flash on the details of Will's life from the last month or so - the fishing, the encephalitis, the stress of his work. It's information someone could have gathered by following him.

Will has never told anyone how...trapped...he feels. There's so much pressure - there's always so much pressure, ever since his childhood, to just be a little more normal, act a little less crazy, to stop fighting on the schoolyard and stop bringing home roadkill to take apart and see how the animal worked. He's done his best to escape - his little house out in the fields, his solitary pursuits, his prickly personality projection and the shield of his glasses and shabby clothes. With all the contortions he's put himself through, he's settled into a space where he sort of fits. He's found a job where his morbid inclinations are a definite plus. He found a *friend* - someone who didn't run screaming when Will told him how good it felt to put ten bullets into another human being.

How can the Ripper know all this about him? It's not visible - he's worked so hard to make sure it's not visible. It's under his skin. How does he see it? How does he *know*? Because Will knows what this is - sees the heart at his feet and knows whose it is. This isn't just a gift. This isn't a way to goad at Jack. This is a declaration.

I see you. I see how you are trapped, constrained. I have what you want - what will set you free.

The Chesapeake Ripper killed this man for him. He killed the last man for him, two days ago. He killed the one before, for him. He's maybe been killing for Will since Cassie Boyle. Every man and woman who has died at this man's, this monster's hands since Will stepped out of the classroom, they are all his fault.

Look at yourself. Look at the iron bars around you, the damage that they've done. Look what I'm offering you.

"Will?"

Jack's voice at his back startles him out of his trance. There are people all around him, staring at him. He rips his eyes away from theirs and sees the heavy bars of the old round cage, over him, around him, trapping him. He turns and pushes his way toward the exit.

"Will-"

There are people in his way, blocking the gate. Will shoves hard at someone, gets another with his elbow. There are sounds of outrage around him, a rising, changing tone to the wall of useless noise.

He vomits in the first available patch of green.

"Will!"

Fuck, Jack followed him, of course he did, with Beverly hovering beside, a ring of faceless people forming to stare. Concern, anger, amusement, frustration.

"I can't be here," he hears himself say. "Jack, I'm no good to you like this and you don't have enough information yet to make me useful."

Beverly is speaking to Jack, eyes wide and voice low. Someone brings him a bottle of water and he doesn't even manage to grab it on the first try. He goes with that, deliberately struggling with the cap until Jack walks over and snatches it out of his hand. "Everybody back to work!" he shouts.

He wraps Will's fingers around the open bottle a moment later, big hand covering Will's, guiding and supporting as Will lifts the bottle and rinses his mouth. Drinks.

His grip feels like handcuffs.

"Okay? Okay, now," Jack gentles, as if he's talking to a crime victim. It makes Will want to punch him, but the sentiment is useful. "This is really getting to you."

"Let me go home," Will begs quietly.

"I'll have someone take you back to the dorms. I don't want you left alone, right now."

Will curls in on himself, conscious of Jack's hand on his shoulder pinning him in place. "All I *want* is to be left alone."

"Will, we just got Miriam back. I refuse to lose you."

Like Jack has anything to say in the matter. This is all happening right under his eyes and he can't see what's going on, what the Ripper is doing. "I need to revise my profile," he says quietly. "He's not a psychopath, Jack. I don't think he's a psychopath at all. He's a narcissist, and he's a sadist, but he definitely has empathy."

He's like me, Will doesn't say. It's the only thing that makes sense. It's the only way he could *know.*

"I don't see empathy here," Jack protests. "I see torture, I see carnage."

"Empathy doesn't have to mean sympathy," Will says.

Jack thinks about that for a moment. "Good," he finally says. "You'd be in some trouble otherwise, I guess."

"Probably," Will agrees.

They pour him into the back of a squad car. It's a different one than before, this one smelling slightly like stale cigarettes. He sits in the back and stares at the young officer's blonde hair through the safety screen, just another cage that he's trapped in. She doesn't have any gum.

At some point, not long into the drive, Will looks out the window and realizes where they are.

"Stop the car," he says. When the driver looks back at him, hesitant, he changes his tone. He's harmless. He isn't a collar, he's fellow law enforcement, and she'd been assigned to protect him, not guard him. "Please, pull over. I'm going to be sick again."

That works, and she pulls quickly into the empty bike lane and stops. The locks click, and he unbuckles, gets the door open, stumbles out to brace his hands on his knees and bend over at the side of the road.

She doesn't get out, right away. Takes the moment to pull out her phone and check something.

Will bolts.

He's to the trees before he hears her react, and then her shout is more confused than angry. The squad car door slams, but he's behind the trees, behind the gas station. He takes a hard turn north and west, cutting across an unfenced backyard, and then jumps, grabbing the top of a wooden fence and bracing hard against it with one foot on a cross beam to push himself over. He almost lands in a pool, but rolls across pavement instead, out of her sight now.

"Agent Graham!?"

He catches his breath for a few seconds, making sure she isn't close enough to hear him, before getting to his feet and taking off at a jog, keeping to the soft quiet of grass and bare soil.

He crosses three streets, darting from dark yard to yard, before he sees a familiar stone wall and follows it around to a nearly hidden gate, where he lets himself into the backyard. For a moment he just stands there, breathing, as if the air here will be different in this relatively safe space than it was on the other side of the wall.

He half expects the lights to come on and Hannibal to find him here, the way he had found him in the driveway not long ago. He'd looked so soft and vulnerable in his pajamas, without the armor of his sharp and layered suits. Standing in the snow in bare and fragile feet. A low sound escapes Will's throat, and he licks his lips once before shaking his head and proceeding to the back patio door, which opens easily with a credit card and a skilled hand.

He toes his shoes off and leaves them on the mat. Strips off his jacket and leaves it on the table, with his gun, his wallet, his keys. His phone buzzes in his hand as he goes to put it down, so he turns it off, waiting for it to power down completely, and stares at it for a moment, considering his knowledge of the little pond in Hannibal's backyard.

If Jack is able to use the phone to track him here, even turned off, he'll call Hannibal before bashing down the door. It will be enough time, enough warning. He leaves it with the rest of his stuff and pads up the stairs.

This part of the house is completely dark and silent. Will's never been up here - he doesn't imagine Hannibal often invites people up here - but it's just much a set piece as his dining room. The master bedroom is easy to find, the door slightly ajar, and Will slips inside, past the samurai armor and the open walk-in closet, paintings and thick rich drapes, to the bed at the center of the room.

Hannibal is sleeping. There's enough ambient light coming in through the window that Will can make out every detail of his face, and for a long time, Will just stands and watches him like this, relaxed and at peace. Watches him dreaming, his eyes moving rapidly under the thin skin of his lids, watches his nostrils flare and his lips twitch slightly, whatever is happening behind his eyes slipping faintly onto his face. He isn't wearing a shirt.

Will strips off his belt and his own shirt and climbs onto the bed. He's already in place to pin Hannibal's arms by the time the man's eyes finally open and start to focus. "What - Will?"

God, his voice sounds so small. So frightened and confused. Will can't help his own small sound, and then he's pressing his mouth to Hannibal's slack and startled lips. "Please," he breathes.

Under him, Hannibal tries to move. His hands twitch in Will's hold and his body shifts, pushing back at him and then, when that doesn't work, trying to squirm away. He turns his face toward the window, and Will takes the opportunity to find out what the skin of his throat tastes like.

Hannibal gasps. "What are you doing here?" He draws his arms in toward his body, over his chest, and pushes up, against Will's weight and hold. "Will, what's happened? What are you - " he breaks off into another gasp, this one wetter, as Will tests his teeth against Hannibal's neck. "Oh…"

He pushes again, and Will bears down, using his weight and position. Hannibal's knee comes up as they struggle, though Will's not sure if it's supposed to be an attack or if it's incidental. Either way, he traps Hannibal's leg between his own thighs, stealing that avenue of escape and pressing down with his hips until there's no doubt in his mind Hannibal can feel his hardness. "Please," he hisses against his throat, even as he humps down against Hannibal's struggling body. "Let me. Just let me, I need this. I need something - I need this."

Hannibal goes still under him, no longer struggling. After a moment, Will shudders and turns his head to kiss him on the mouth again, gentle this time. He doesn't respond at first, so Will growls and kisses him harder, sucking and biting at his lips and tongue, until finally Hannibal starts pressing up against him again - and whether he's fighting or participating Will isn't sure and in this moment doesn't really care. It feels good. It feels so good, to have Hannibal under him, all the strength and beauty of his body, his mind, entirely at Will's disposal. Will could wreck him, like this. Strip away the veneer of civility and find the animal thing in him that calls to Will.

"Let me," he whispers, but it isn't a request this time. He feels Hannibal shiver under him as he presses the man's wrists up, over his head, and slides their bodies together.

*

When Will wakes, he is desperately hung-over. Nothing else registers for a moment, and he curls up on the cool sheets, hands pressed over his face and groaning. It's the smell of sex that jerks him back to himself, fully awake and terrified.

He's in Hannibal's bedroom. The curtains are closed against the bright light outside, only filtering through dimly and peeking in through the cracks. He's alone in the bed. There is a glass of water on the table beside him, and a carafe with more, and two white pills on a small blue saucer.

He's naked. No one else is in the room. He can't hear water running or movement nearby.

The sheets are rumpled and stained, semen and sweat and. And smears of blood. But the blankets are folded neatly at the foot of the bed.

He hasn't been arrested.

His clothes aren't on the floor anymore. The closed curtains and thoughtfully provided hydration and painkillers suggest Hannibal at least wants to talk to him before calling the police. At best…

Is it best? If Hannibal doesn't press charges, doesn't file a complaint, doesn't tell anyone what happened during the night, what Will did to him, is that really best? Will doesn't want to live in a cage, but if he can't keep himself locked down in the metaphorical one he escaped last night, then maybe a literal one *would* be best.

Will is sitting cross-legged on the bed with his head in his hands when the door is quietly nudged open. He looks up to find Hannibal standing there in a thin robe, legs and chest bare underneath, and holding a lacquered wooden tray.

Hannibal smiles when their eyes meet. "I thought I could be back before you woke." He slips into the room and sets the tray on the mattress beside Will before disappearing into the bathroom. There's a slight hitch to his normally smooth gate, and Will is wracked by a pang of guilt even as his mouth waters from the way it makes the robe flutter against his thigh.

There are several things on the tray, which has four spindly little legs and appears to be designed to straddle someone's lap. He recognizes the general style of the meal as asian-inspired, maybe Japanese, with several dishes of what looks like very fancy sushi, some kind of soup under a glass cover, pink rice with red beans and black sesame seeds, and a little clay pot of what might be sake, warm to the touch. His cell phone is tucked into a little compartment at the side, along with a newspaper and a tablet. "You made me breakfast?" Will manages to croak out.

"It seemed appropriate," Hannibal says when he comes back from the bathroom. He has a little wicker hamper in one hand that he sets on the far side-table before slipping between the sheets at Will's side and adjusting the pillows. "Drink your water, at least, if you won't take the aspirin." He reaches past Will to lift the tray, then nudges Will's knee until he stretches his legs out and leans back against the pile of marshmallows Hannibal has built for him, so that Hannibal can set the tray over his lap and pick up the teapot.

"I hurt you," Will protests as he watches him pour. There's only a brief interruption of the flow before Hannibal's hands return to their smooth motion. "Hannibal, I hurt you."

The other man sets the teapot down and reclines at Will's side. He picks up Will's own hand and brings it to his bruised and bitten lips, kissing his fingers and then his palm. "Did I ask you to stop?"

Will realizes he's holding his breath, and makes himself exhale. Inhale. It sounds shakey and weak to his own ears. "You might have been afraid to," Will mumbles. "I hurt you, Hannibal."

There's a sharp pain as Hannibal nips the tip of his middle finger, pressing his teeth there for just a moment, almost tight enough to break skin. Then the pressure is gone. "I am not afraid of you, Will," Hannibal tells him. "You were marvelous. Drink your water, my dear. You'll feel better." He watches as Will obediently drains the glass, washing the pills down with the last of it, and then he leans his head against Will's shoulder. "There."

He doesn't look afraid, or feel tense. He doesn't look disgusted or upset. He seems comfortable. Relaxed. Happy.

Hannibal picks up the clay pot and tips a small splash of what definitely smells like sake into one of three nested clay cups. "Champagne might have been more traditional," he says quietly. "But it wouldn't really have gone so well with your fish." He nudges a small plate with several sashimi and carpaccio roses, flesh cut paper thin, each curling blossom spotted with pearls of pink roe, like dewdrops on petals. "The soup has a kombu and ginger base. The meal should be mild on your stomach."

"This is too much," Will whispers, his heart too high in his throat for the words to come out strong. "Hannibal-"

"Will," Hannibal says softly. "I assure you, if I had wanted you to stop, I would have stopped you."

Will knows. It's why he came to Hannibal - the memory of Tobias Budge shattered on the man's office floor. "I think I expected you to stop me. Fight me. Hurt me back."

He can feel Hannibal's smile against the skin of his throat, over his pulse. "My darling boy. I would never stop you. I can honestly say, I think I may be happier in this moment than I have ever been in all my life."

Chapter End Notes

Regarding consent: Will seems to force himself on Hannibal. Hannibal's into it, but Will doesn't know that at the time.

Your comments seriously make my day ; they brighten up my life and definitely encourage me to update regularly. Thank you so much for all your kind words!

Shiji

Chapter Summary

He has to trust Hannibal - respect that he knows what he's doing. He has to let him make his own decisions about his well-being, like he said before. Something has gone tight in Will, though, looking down at those scars. He's been relying on Hannibal's affection as proof that there are things in him worth caring for - but if pain is something Hannibal seeks, is he only attracted because he knew Will would be capable of hurting him?

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains mentions of cruelty to animals and animal death - not Will's dogs.

Will has never been in a bathtub this big. It's as deep as the claw-foot tubs of his childhood, but nearly twice as wide - big enough for two, for sure. He'd been disappointed when, after filling the tub and adding measured splashes of several oils and potions, Hannibal had excused himself instead of joining him.

The hot water feels amazing after almost three days now without even a quick shower, and Will sinks down into the scented, gently steaming water. He can stretch out almost all the way, his feet resting flat against the far wall of the tub with his knees only slightly bent, just shy of breaking the surface.

He's almost asleep when Hannibal returns, slipping quietly into the bathroom with just the click of the door and faint pad of bare feet on tile. The sound of Hannibal bustling around, moving things and running water, is comfortably domestic, and Will finds himself enjoying it without opening his eyes. It's the sound of silk rustling that finally makes him look, as the robe slips from Hannibal's shoulders, down his back, to puddle at his feet. Will is about to make an appreciative comment when he notices something he didn't see last night in the dark.

In the dappled, multicolored light from the little stained glass window over the bathtub, Will can make out very faint, thin lines, some white and some dark, criss-crossing Hannibal's skin. They make a haphazard pattern across his back and shoulders, down sporadically across his buttocks and the tops of his thighs. The scars are old - very old - and faded, and Will is suddenly very conscious of the knowledge that in all their conversations, Hannibal has never once mentioned anything about his childhood.

Will has seen enough bodies marked by long term abuse to know what it looks like. His eyes move over the skin on display and can't help the realization that Hannibal wants him to see

this, wants him to know. The other man turns to smile warmly at him before bending to check the water, and Will notes the faint, dark shadow of an old cigarette burn at his hip before taking in the whole picture of him and smiling softly back.

"Are you enjoying your soak?" Hannibal asks.

"It's wonderful. Lonely, though." Hannibal takes the hint and straightens up to step into the water with him. "And I'm kind of surprised there aren't any massage jets." He hopes Hannibal will understand it isn't a complaint. This is far more luxury already than Will quite knows what to do with, even before the slick, wet brush and press of Hannibal's skin as Will sits up a bit so they can arrange and entangle themselves.

"I generally avoid machines designed to eliminate tasks I find more rewarding to do by hand," Hannibal murmurs into his ear. Resting back against the incline of the tub edge, he takes hold of Will's biceps and encourages him to lean back, against Hannibal's chest.

Will sighs happily as Hannibal's hands slide over his arms and shoulders, as if looking for tense or sore spots. He lets his eyes drift to half-mast, enjoying the sight and feel of Hannibal's skin against his. Hannibal has lit several candles, and there is a pitcher of iced tea with flowers and lemons in it sitting on a tray at the edge of the tub. Will finds himself chuckling at the deliberate and determined hedonism of it all, until he sees his phone sitting next to the glasses.

Hannibal must feel him tense, because he stops petting him and wraps his arms around Will's middle instead. "I didn't turn it on." He noses at Will's ear, then leans his chin on Will's bare shoulder, his breath cool against damp skin. "I don't know what's going on, Will, but Jack has called me four times since you arrived last night."

"What did you say?" Will asks, feeling cold despite the heat of the water and Hannibal's touch.

"Nothing. I haven't answered. But if I continue not to answer, he may come looking, or send someone." He pauses. "I checked a few news sites, hoping to find the reason for his calls before I bothered you. Tattlecrime is claiming the FBI put out an all points bulletin for you, in this area, within an hour of a body being discovered in the park." His voice is hesitant, careful, as if he's afraid of spooking Will or driving him away.

Will sits up, pulling out of Hannibal's embrace, and wraps his arms around his own knees. There isn't room to go far, without getting out of the tub, and he can still feel Hannibal's lower body against his.

When Will doesn't respond, Hannibal goes very quiet and still. Will doesn't know what he's supposed to do, or say. He should be assuring Hannibal that Lounds is taking everything out of context, as usual, but then he'll have to explain how he ran from his escort, and why. He can't possibly tell Hannibal why.

"I have a very good attorney," Hannibal says behind him. "If you need me to call her-"

"Jesus," Will breathes. "No, I didn't - I didn't hurt anybody." He presses his face hard against his knees. "Anybody else. Nobody thinks I did. Jack wanted me to stay on lockdown, basically, and I took off. If he's calling you, he's probably hoping you'd have some idea where I'd go. Unless you told him about this?" He turns his head to look at Hannibal, cheek pressed to his knee still, and gestures between them.

Hannibal shakes his head and leans forward, sliding his hand up to Will's shoulder and slipping his other hand around to press against Will's chest. "Jack and I haven't spoken in a few weeks. You were still avoiding me, I think, the last time I ran into him." He strokes carefully, slowly, over Will's tense back. "He's concerned about your safety?" Hannibal asks.

"I'm not telling him I'm here with you. Aside from it being none of his business, I don't want to get you involved with all this." He sighs and leans into Hannibal's soothing touch. "The Chesapeake Ripper has definitely been watching me. Probably for a long time, now." He turns and presses his forehead to Hannibal's arm. "I wouldn't have come here last night, if I were sober. It puts you at too much risk."

"Then I am very glad you were not sober," Hannibal says bluntly. "You don't want Jack to keep you wrapped in cotton wool. You wish to be allowed to make your own decisions where your wellbeing is concerned. Please allow me the same."

Will smiles, and turns his face just enough to set his teeth lightly against the skin of Hannibal's bicep. He can feel the tension of the moment break, feel Hannibal's answering smile in the shift of his body against and around Will's. "I should call Jack. They're probably wasting manpower looking for me. And you're right - they might turn up here sooner or later."

Hannibal reaches around him to wipe his hands dry on a small towel, before handing the cloth to Will and picking up Will's phone.

"What, now?"

"If you get it out of the way, you will be better able to relax," Hannibal tells him simply.

Will stares at him for a moment, then takes the phone and turns it on. There are dozens of missed calls and texts, from Jack and Beverly and multiple numbers with the Quantico prefix. He turns away from Hannibal to make the call, leaning his elbows on the edge of the tub.

"Will?" Jack asks when he answers. He sounds terrified that it might not be Will's voice that responds, and Will finds himself curling up a bit in guilt, remembering all those phantom calls from Miriam Lass.

"Hey Jack," he says.

"Where are you?" Jack demands. "Are you safe?"

"I'm fine," Will assures him. He feels Hannibal's lips against his shoulder and smiles. "I just went to ground. I told you I wanted to be left alone."

"And you thought that was a good idea? Made up your mind somewhere between showing up at a crime scene puking drunk and ditching your police escort?"

"Yeah, I did," Will tells him. He shivers as Hannibal keeps kissing his shoulder, his throat, his hands coming around Will to stroke his chest. "I figured if I could hide from the FBI I could hide from the Ripper. Seems to be working so far. You're not tracing this call, are you? If you're trying, please stop. There's a chance the Ripper has some kind of in with law enforcement and I really don't want him finding my bolt-hole."

Jack is silent for a moment, and then Will hears muffled conversation. Hannibal seems to seize the moment, nibbling at Will's jaw and dropping a hand to stroke the top of Will's thigh.

"Fine, we're not tracking you. But I need you here. There's a lot going on with the body we found last night. That heart-"

"From the self-portrait," Will supplies. "Was the alimentary tract flushed again?"

There's a pause. "Yes."

"Heart and tongue removed?"

"Jesus, you were in there for all of thirty seconds and you were stinking drunk."

"The picture's easier to see if you know what message the artist was trying to send," Will offers.

"And what message is that?" Jack asks.

Will tries not to be distracted by Hannibal's hand, stroking from his thigh to his hip and back again, his mouth working at the ear Will doesn't have pressed to the phone. "If someone told you they were half a man. Hungry. Empty inside. Missing their heart," he squirms as Hannibal starts to toy with his nipple. "What would that metaphor say to you? And if that same person started sending you flowers, hearts, secret messages only you could understand-" his breath hitches and he has to cover his mouth with his hand, hoping Jack doesn't hear the splash or the way his voice went wobbly.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jack asks.

He squirms as the hand on his thigh shifts to wrap around his penis, and tries to elbow Hannibal gently off. "Not being tortured by the Ripper, I promise."

"You think this latest wave of kills is aimed at you?" Jack asks him. "I know the last one, with the fishhooks, but all three?"

"They're love letters," Will says. He plunges his hand into the water to catch Hannibal's wrist, stopping the motion of his clever hand - but Hannibal has two hands and one of Will's is occupied keeping his phone from falling into the water. "I'll come in soon. I have to go for now."

"Will-"

Will hangs up and flings the phone to bounce gently on the plush bathmat. He uses his hold on Hannibal's wrist as he turns, bringing the other man's arm up and forcing him over, onto his knees and down, sputtering, into the water. Will grants him the small mercy of fingers threaded through his hair, tugging his face up and out of the water after he's had a few seconds under. "Were you trying to get me in trouble?"

"Trying to get myself in trouble," Hannibal gasps, once he can breathe. He presses up against Will's body, and Will has to close his eyes for the slide of his wet skin against his erection. Hannibal is radiating satisfaction, despite his helpless position, and realization washes over Will like a tidal wave.

"You like this," he says, stunned. "Like it *like* this."

He was so worried about how rough he'd been, the blurred memory of pushing himself into Hannibal's too-tight body, the sounds he'd made and the way he'd struggled against him in the dark - but now, with his shoulder twisted back in what has to be a painful armbar, Will's fist in his hair, Hannibal is smiling. He shifts against Wil, rubbing their bodies together, twisting just enough to force Will to tighten his grip or risk letting him go.

Hannibal is *loving* this.

There's a frozen moment where Will takes in the picture they make, the knowledge of those scars across Hannibal's back, and quails. He knows the statistics on revictimization. The patterns of thought and behavior that stem from childhood coping mechanisms and continue for the adult, affecting every relationship in the survivor's life.

"I'd like anything you gave me," Hannibal insists. He rubs himself back against Will, panting, catching Will's erection between slick thighs, and oh god, his voice...

He has to trust Hannibal - respect that he knows what he's doing. He has to let him make his own decisions about his well-being, like he said before. Something has gone tight in Will, though, looking down at those scars. He's been relying on Hannibal's affection as proof that there are things in him worth caring for - but if pain is something Hannibal seeks, is he only attracted because he knew Will would be capable of hurting him?

Does it matter, at this point? Will is so far gone on this man, so far into his debt of care and acceptance. If this is what Hannibal wants from him, Will can provide it.

He leans up over Hannibal's back, jerking his arm up just a bit further, and rubs his fingertips over Hannibal's abused entrance. "Want to test that theory?"

*

Before heading to the labs, Will has another stop to make at the Quantico compound. He has to swipe his badge, which probably means Jack will become aware he's on the grounds, but hopefully he'll have at least a little time before he's dragged away.

"Agent Russell," he says, nodding in greeting to the man who meets him at the gate. "Everything okay?"

The big blond man grins as he lets Will into the fenced enclosure. "Oh, everybody was peaceful as you please until about two minutes ago." He latches the gate behind them. "I guess they know your car."

Will can hear a familiar muffled cacophony of barking from inside the kennels. The handful of tracking and bomb-sniffing dogs in outside runs are jogging and jostling, picking up on the excitement. When the doors opens and his pack floods out, Will has to go to his knees or be bowled over. "Hey guys," he says softly, laughing as they compete to reach his face, pushing and shoving and wrestling for the chance to lick his hands. "Hey, hey, I'm here. I'm here."

Usually his voice and touch is enough to soothe them, but enough of the FBI dogs are barking and running around the adjacent yards to keep the energy going. There's a jumble of messages coming from the strange dogs, from territorial warnings to pleas for attention, mixed messages abounding.

He's vaguely aware of Agent Russell leaning on the fence and watching him with his little horde crashing into and around him like a circular wave as he tries to touch them all at once. "Thank you," he says without looking up from scratching and hugging his babies. "They look good."

Russell crouches down to join the petting party, soaking up some of the excess excitement that has Princess and Mop running around them all in haphazard loops when Will can't quite reach them between the larger dogs. "They're no trouble," he says. "Friendly as anything, and they're all happy to share a run so they don't take up much room. I let them socialize some with the new pair of bloodhounds we just got in from Texas. A lot of the old hands are too dominating for playtime, but it's good for the newbies to get used to being around unfamiliar animals."

"Glad they're earning their keep, then," Will says, and then gives up on dignity completely and flops down so they can climb in his lap. "Who's a good boy?" he asks, catching Rusty by the jowls and shaking his whole head when the big dog tries to headbutt him in a rapture of affection.

"Canine protective custody is a new one for me. Wish they were all this easy," Russell says. He gets ahold of Winston and scuffs his ruff, fingers digging deep in plush fur and making the dog pant happily under the attention and start to settle. "You hear about the guys they dragged in this morning? From your vic's house?"

"What guys?" Will asks.

There turns out to be three of them - pitt and rottweiler, mostly, but all mutt, and scarred to hell and back. One of them is missing an eye, and another has a shredded mess of scar tissue where his ear should be. Will stands with his back against the chain-link of the opposing kennels, hoping the distance will help the dogs calm sooner. They're in separate enclosures, and all the other dogs on this hall have apparently been moved to outside runs or doubled up somewhere for the duration.

"We're going to have to euthanize them," Russell says over the snarling and near-rabid barking. "Waiting on the court order. For now, they're evidence. There was one more on site,

but he got loose when the agents on the scene opened the shed. Took a chunk out of one of them before someone plugged him. Damned shame."

Will crouches down slowly, staring at the animals without making eye contact. The dogs start to quiet a bit in the face of his lack of reaction, settling in to pace and growl, occasionally showing off their teeth, but no longer trying to reach him through the fencing. "Was he holding fights on his property?"

"They don't think so. There's a couple of guys working from what they picked up there this morning - there might be enough to pin down some associates, maybe find where he was fighting them or who he was selling them to."

Will nods absently, his mind racing. A dogfighter, battered in a cage. There's a layer here that he'd missed until now, and it is literally the only clue they've ever gotten about how the Chesapeake Ripper might choose his victims. "I need to be CCed on every step of that investigation. Crawford will authorize it if it's needed." There's no doubt in his mind about that. "He'll want the files, too."

The Ripper knew this victim, or knew of him somehow. He chose him specifically for Will. Chose him for poetic contrast as Will's effigy, for the irony of the staging, for the maximum impact of the gift and the promise it makes.

"I have to go." He stands slowly, keeping his motions smooth so as not to rile the dogs up again. "Thanks again for looking out for my guys," he says, and accepts the handshake when it's offered. His smile doesn't reach his eyes, though.

*

Jack finds him about four minutes after Will sits down with the files. He ignores the man's shouting in favor of flipping through documents, reconstructing personal histories and looking for clues. He'd told Jack the victims weren't important - they'd never been important before in a Ripper kill, and there had never been anything to tie any of them together. But maybe he wasn't looking hard enough, or looking in the right way.

Caleb Crane turns out to have been divorced in absentia three years ago after walking out on his wife and two children, and had made a total of six child support payments in all that time. He seemed to have been living well beyond his means since then, sponging off a series of wealthy and well connected lovers. A deadbeat, an oath-breaker, a terrible husband and father who'd failed to provide for his family. Killed and presented sliced neatly in half, served up as a promise of constancy. Of devotion. A declaration of faithfulness and intent to provide.

Eugene Cook, with three domestic violence restraining orders from two different women over the last eight years and a violent rape charge dismissed on a technicality in 2004, his chest torn to pieces and stuffed with living flowers still rooted to the ground, his brain replaced by fire. Intended as proof of gentleness, of tenderness. A promise not to turn his violence against Will, to be a thoughtful and careful lover.

And now Harold Greer, a dog fighter and perpetrator of animal cruelty. A dog murderer, according to the remains found on his property, probably culled fighters and bait animals

used to train the surviving dogs to kill. Will's been so worried the Ripper might go after his dogs to get at him, whether through outright harm or kidnapping them for leverage. Animal death and torture are hallmarks of psychopathy, after all. But the Ripper isn't a psychopath - he's sure of that now - and this feels an awful lot like a promise to keep his animals safe. To care for and protect them, or at least never to harm them.

"Are you even listening to me?" Jack demands.

"I know how he's choosing his victims," Will says. He scrubs his hands over his face and feels Jack go absolutely still beside him. "It's not particularly useful, but I know what his victim pool is."

"What?" Jack asks, pulling a chair up and planting himself beside Will at the desk. "Show me. What did you find?"

Will chuckles darkly and waves his hand over the stacks of files. There are nineteen of them, some fat and some thin. He has most of them memorized. "Assholes," he says simply. "They're all assholes." When Jack frowns, Will can't help laughing out loud. "I told you it wasn't particularly useful. Though if I go back through them all, I can probably reconstruct some possibilities of what they did to piss him off from how they were displayed. That tongue in the bible *screams* sanctimonious hypocrite, doesn't it?"

"If you say so," Jack says with narrowed eyes.

"I'm going to take these home with me," Will says, starting to collect everything into piles. "Can you pass me that box?"

"You're not going home, Will."

"Well, no, not home," Will agrees. He kicks the dufflebag he'd taken from his house when the forensic horde had first descended. "I've got somewhere else to stay, for a while. If you promise not to track it, I'll leave my phone on."

Jack glowers and leans over, planting a fist on one of the files Will is trying to gather. "What makes you think I'm just going to let you walk out of here?"

"Am I under arrest?" Will asks. He stands up so that Jack isn't looming over him, leaving the files behind on the desk. "Because if not, and I am getting tired of saying this, I am on extended medical leave for another three weeks. Maybe longer if my MRI comes back suspicious or my white blood count stays elevated."

"You're making official protective custody very tempting," Jack complains.

"Right, because putting me in a cell will keep my cortisol down *and* help you solve this case," Will counters. "Let me telecommute for a while. I'm most vulnerable in transit, and every time I leave headquarters is another chance for the Ripper to pick up my trail. I'll check in regularly, and you can keep me posted on any new developments. Let me see what I can get out of the existing evidence before another body drops."

"You think there's going to be another." Jack says flatly. "This is his longest series to date."

"He's not done," Will tells him. "There will be more. He hasn't gotten what he wants, yet."

*

It takes him three hours to get back to Baltimore by public transit, since he takes a deliberately inefficient route and changes trains in Annapolis. He's fairly confident, by time he gets into the cab, that he isn't being followed and no one is paying him any more attention than a man who keeps accidentally bumping people with a cardboard box deserves.

Hannibal greets him at the door and takes his bag from him, leaning in to kiss him softly on the mouth before stepping back to let him inside. "You're just in time for dinner."

Dōsei

Chapter Summary

"What are you making?"

"A surprise."

Will nips at his skin for his smug tone, and Hannibal shifts against him, smiling. The knife clicks as he sets it down on the countertop, and Hannibal reaches for a dishtowel to wipe peach-juice from his hands. Will takes the cloth away and drops it at the edge of the counter. "Don't let me stop you," he says, and nudges the knife back toward Hannibal, who huffs out a breath of a laugh but complies, picking up the knife and returning to work.

Chapter specific warnings in the endnotes for kink and violence things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Will hears the car door slam outside, he looks over at the clock and debates leaving the desk where he's set up his laptop. Hannibal's only been gone a few hours.

They're clearly in some kind of honeymoon phase. Will has no obligations beyond reviewing old casefiles - even the dogs are being cared for by other people. Hannibal has been taking time off, too, reducing his patient hours drastically enough to spend whole days in bed, tied at the wrists or pinned under Will's body, giving every indication that he's ecstatic to be there. It's like some kind of kinky sex vacation.

If there are boundaries between them or boundaries to what Hannibal will allow, Will hasn't found them yet. If anything, Hannibal has egged him on. They'd experimented with Will pulling Hannibal's necktie so tight it left him purple-faced and light-headed, and they'd enjoyed it so much that last night, when he'd knelt nude on the hearthrug, Hannibal had pulled the belt from Will's slacks and wrapped it around his own throat. The contrast against his firelit skin had been amazing, and the sounds he'd made - until he couldn't make them anymore - had stolen Will's breath away, too.

It can't last. Nothing this intense can possibly last, and sooner or later they will have to go back to work. They will have to reenter the real world. Will is going to have to go home, eventually. If he's lucky there will be time for gourmet meals and bouts of intense fucking on odd weekends, before he has to run back to the dogs and work and leave Hannibal alone in

his big, soft bed. Assuming, of course, that Hannibal doesn't get tired of him, and that Will doesn't drive him off.

Hannibal still seems to be under some kind of illusion that this could possibly be permanent - or maybe it's the honeymoon thing again, clouding his view of the future and softening all the hard angles of their so disparate lives. Sometimes, Will is half-convinced that Hannibal is enjoying the domestic stuff nearly as much as all the wild sex. He certainly never seems to get tired of watching Will eat his cooking. He's been as enthusiastic about feeding Will morsels by hand as he has been about getting his mouth on various parts of Will's body, which is saying something.

Thinking about Hannibal's mouth is enough to get him up out of the chair, after cracking his back and stretching slightly cramped limbs. He's getting plenty of physical activity but it isn't quite the kind he's used to. Maybe he should talk to Hannibal about that walk in the park.

Actually, he probably shouldn't try to take Hannibal on a date somewhere he's recently investigated two dead bodies. Hannibal's been very accepting so far, but If Will wants this to last as long as possible, he probably shouldn't lean into the morbidity too hard. There's also the chance the Ripper might spend time there, considering the placement of those crime scenes.

He finds Hannibal, predictably, in the kitchen, tucking his market basket away under the counter and humming to himself. If he were a good...boyfriend? Lover? Will would go to greet him, offer his help scrubbing and putting away the pile of fruit and vegetables Hannibal has brought home. Instead, since it seems like Hannibal has yet to notice he's being observed, Will leans against the door jamb and just enjoys the view.

Hannibal is in one of his suits again, tailored to show off his broad shoulders and trim waist. He ditches the jacket as Will watches, hanging it over the back of a chair before rolling up his sleeves and slipping into an apron. As much as he likes Hannibal all dressed up, and as much as he craves Hannibal undressed, this in-between state, half undone, is becoming Will's favorite. It's...comfortable. Homey.

When Hannibal exhausts whatever demon he's chasing, flirting with Willl's darkness, Will hopes he can keep this, even if he's only invited to dinner as a friend. It's going to be so hard to give all this up.

He watches Hannibal clean some of the produce, leave leeks and leafy greens to soak in cool water, put the root vegetables and mushrooms away. Pretty soon, there isn't much left but a neat row of what looks like fat, oversized yellow peaches. Will waits until Hannibal has peeled and thinly sliced the first one and started on the second before slipping up behind him, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's middle and nuzzling the short hair at the back of his neck when he jumps. "Hello."

"Hello Will." Hannibal's voice is rough, raspy. He lets his hands rest on the cutting board while he turns to meet Will's kiss over his shoulder. "How was your day?"

"Did some reading," Will says. "Sent that report off to Jack. Recovered from what you did to me this morning." He traces his lips against the edge of Hannibal's collar when the other man

turns back to finish with the fruit in his hand, and Will finds himself smiling against the burn of affection in his chest for Hannibal's fancy food purchases. He probably paid at least two bucks each peach, maybe more, and there isn't a blemish on any of them. "What are you making?"

"A surprise."

Will nips at his skin for his smug tone, and Hannibal shifts against him, smiling. The knife clicks as he sets it down on the countertop, and Hannibal reaches for a dishtowel to wipe peach-juice from his hands. Will takes the cloth away and drops it at the edge of the counter. "Don't let me stop you," he says, and nudges the knife back toward Hannibal, who huffs out a breath of a laugh but complies, picking up the knife and returning to work.

Will rests his chin on Hannibal's shoulder and watches him halve a fruit and twist out the pit before discarding it and stripping away the skin. The halves go face-down on the bamboo board to be cut neatly and quickly, Hannibal's skilled hands moving smoothly and without haste to render the fruit into thin, translucent slices.

He loves watching Hannibal's hands.

"I met a woman outside the market this morning," Hannibal tells him, apparently trying his best to ignore his tie being loosened while he slices. "She was walking three large dogs. I stopped to chat with her a bit."

"Mhm," Will says, encouraging, as he pops the first few buttons of Hannibal's shirt. Now he can push the collar down enough to rub his lips against the chafed and heated band where Hannibal's blood has started to darken under his skin.

"She gave me the card of a handyman who built her animals a very comfortable run and kennel. She suggested getting it done before the summer, when the-" he breaks off with a gasp. "Will-"

Will removes his teeth from the tender skin under Hannibal's ear. "You can't build me a dog run."

"They'll want time outside," Hannibal says. "I don't mean to ban them from the house; I know how well trained they are. But I'd like to keep them out of the garden, when they're out there unattended, considering how much trouble you have with Buster digging, now. And they'll need shade when it gets warmer."

"Hannibal," Will's voice sounds strange to his own ears. He feels like he's speaking with his lungs full of crackling glass. "We've been doing this for a few weeks. You can't modify your house."

"I will if I want to," Hannibal says primly. He takes advantage of Will's distraction to slice up another peach as he speaks. "In any case, why shouldn't I? Do you have plans to go wandering? Another secret paramore stashed away, perhaps?"

"Of course not," Will mutters. He presses his face to Hannibal's shoulder, hiding his eyes and hoping they won't get damp enough to ruin Hannibal's vest. "But that's too much. It's too much too soon, and it's...it's too much."

"It isn't." Hannibal keeps peeling and slicing fruit, letting Will have his moment, which Will appreciates. "We may have taken our time getting here, but we've known each other quite well for some time. I'm very certain of how I feel for you. So, unless your objection rests on your own desire for me being temporary-"

"Of course not," Will repeats, feeling helpless.

"-then I can think of no reason why I wouldn't alter my home to accommodate you and your pets. And before you say a word about it, I haven't had need to worry about money for a very long time, so you aren't allowed to use that as an excuse." Hannibal leans back against him, fruit in one sticky hand and knife in the other, nuzzling their cheeks together. "I would shower you in all the finest things in the world, if you would let me."

"Hannibal," Will complains, feeling himself blush.

"You want them to be comfortable, don't you?"

Will sighs hotly and turns his cheek, nosing at Hannibal's ear. "You fight dirty."

"Always."

The pleasure winning the argument brings to Hannibal's tone makes Will grin against his skin despite his defeat. He takes Hannibal's earlobe between his teeth and bites until the skin grows hot against his tongue. Hannibal's gasp makes him bite just a little harder before continuing down his throat, His hands working at the clasp of Hannibal's belt underneath the apron.

He looks down to watch his hands under the cloth, enjoying the idea of jerking Hannibal off while his hands are too covered with juice to retaliate. It's not juice on Hannibal's hands when he looks, though - Hannibal is braced against the countertop with hands smeared red with blood.

"Jesus, what happened?"

"My hand slipped," Hannibal pants. "It's nothing, don't stop."

"I can't just-" but Hannibal is pressing up against his hand, hot and needy, arching his spine to bare his throat. When Will falters, he reaches up and back, threading fingers sticky with blood and peaches through Will's hair and pulling him into a kiss.

By the time Will manages to get Hannibal out of his pants, he can feel damp fingerprints along his jaw, thin rivulets down his throat. "We're ruining your suit," Will warns. When he licks his lips he tastes sweet fruit and the tang of blood.

Hannibal presses his thumb into Will's mouth and reaches down with his other hand, guiding Will's fingers to wrap around the handle of the knife. "Might as well do it properly," he says.

*

He leaves Hannibal in the shower and heads down to the garage. When Will had found out the Bentley dealership Hannibal used for maintenance was all the way in Bethesda, he'd made the man cancel his scheduled oil change and check-up. It didn't make sense for him to drive all that way just to sit around and wait for the technicians, not while Will was at home sitting around idle.

Besides, it feels good to contribute something more material than dishwashing to the relationship.

By the time he finishes and cleans up his mess, the whole house smells like spice and roasting meat and peaches. Hannibal isn't in the kitchen when he peeks, or the study, or the music room, so Will goes back to the kitchen to investigate the pitcher of what looks like lemonade on the counter. Icy drips of condensation run down cut crystal as he pours himself a glass, and the lemonade turns out to have been augmented with peach juice and ginger. It's as amazing as every other thing Hannibal has ever made just for him.

It's such a thoughtful and casual gesture - Hannibal isn't even around to witness Will enjoying it. Will presses the cold glass to his warm face and thinks about love.

When the glass is empty, he strips his grease-marked t-shirt over his head and digs under the counter for the big bottle of dish detergent so that he can take both into the laundry room. If he pretreats the grease he can maybe wash the shirt and keep it around for jobs like this; it won't ever look clean again, but it's not like he needs to look clean if he's helping Hannibal in the garden or cleaning the gutters or something.

They'd talked about him replacing Hannibal's garbage disposal with a newer model. Will's never been in a relationship that involved major household maintenance. It feels desperately *good*. It feels like he could maybe be someone's *husband* someday.

He spreads the t-shirt out on a junk towel, on top of the washing machine, and squirts detergent everywhere it needs to go, soaking it through the cloth so he can scrub at it with his fingers. His mind flashes on the image of Hannibal's hands on Will's plaid shirt, the first night he came here, washing out Abel Gideon's blood. It makes his eyes dart over to the corner sink and - Jesus.

He hits the lights, the glow from the hall no longer enough, and stares at the bloody mess in the corner. The shreds of Hannibal's fancy suit are piled under the high window, but the sink is worse.

It's the sheets, he realizes, after he's been staring at the red and cloudy water in horror for a full minute. Hannibal had given up the suit for a lost cause, but he'd apparently thought he could rescue the sheets. Will crosses the small room in a daze and reaches into the bloody water to agitate the cloth. Sheets and pillowcase, a towel, a dishrag. Will hadn't even wondered what happened to the mess they left in the kitchen before retreating upstairs. Had he brought the knife up with him, or had that been Hannibal? He couldn't remember, now. He'd been so out of his head on the high of it, the way Hannibal had let him, the way Hannibal had begged for it.

Jesus fucking Christ there was so much blood. How had he not noticed?

He'd let Hannibal hustle him into the shower while he was still coming down from orgasm. From the bathroom he'd gone directly into the walk-in closet for clothes, back into the bathroom to tell Hannibal, who'd still been under the water, where he was going, and then out by the hall door without ever stepping foot back into the bedroom. For a panicked moment he can see Hannibal slumped in the shower, passed out while his life swirls down the drain, but - but no, Hannibal had made dinner. Hannibal had made him fucking fancy lemonade, after - after -

Will wipes his hands absently and makes a beeline for the bedroom, intent on making sure that Hannibal is okay. When he finds the other man he is sitting calmly at the bathroom vanity with a glass of red wine and an large first aid kit, apparently changing the bandage on his left bicep where blood has soaked through. He looks up when Will enters and *smiles*. "Darling." When Will just stares at him, Hannibal's smile starts to slip. "Has something happened?"

"Why did you let me do this," Will asks him, voice breathless and broken. "Hannibal…"

Hannibal frowns at him like he's not making sense, then looks down and peels the bandage away for a moment to adjust it. The brief glimpse Will catches of the wound - the wound *he put there had revealed three neat black sutures. "This? Because we both enjoyed it." He looks up at Will, slightly sly. "If I recall, I asked you very nicely for this one." Will's distress seems to really sink in, then, because his eyes go serious and soft. "I don't regret it."*

Will takes in the sight of him, sitting there. He can only see what's bared by Hannibal's undershirt and slacks, but his memory fills in the rest. The bruising on his throat from the belt is the vivid color of a ripe plum; the chafing where the leather had cut and rubbed at his skin is raised and red. There's a large bandaid and a small square of gauze taped in two different places, under his chin and further down, near the clavicle. His wrists are bruised and rubbed raw, but it's his forearms wrapped entirely in gauze that frightens Will the worst. There are major arteries, there. How deeply had he cut?

"I do," Will says. "Hannibal, we can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this."

Hannibal finishes off his bandage and then looks up, his eyes solemn and sad. "I see. I've crossed a line."

"What?" Will asks. "You haven't done anything. I hurt you. I keep hurting you-"

"I asked you for this," Hannibal tells him. "I put the knife in your hand." He frowns down at his hands as he closes the first aid kit and latches the case. "I won't ask again. We can go back to how things were, this morning."

"This morning you could barely talk because last night I choked you with my belt and my dick until you passed out." Will snaps.

Hannibal flinches. The motion is tiny, but it's there.

"Is this all you want from me?" Will asks, plaintive. "Did you sit there in your office right from the start and think about me killing Hobbs and wonder just how much I'd be willing to hurt you if you - if you asked nicely? Plied me with fancy food and wine and… and made me feel like maybe someone actually-"

"I love you," Hannibal says, quietly. He may as well have shouted, for the way the words shoot through Will. They haven't said it, either of them, always dancing around it. Will has been terrified to say it, and for Hannibal to say it now-

"I don't think you do," Will says, just as quietly. "I think you love that I'm capable of violence, and that violence is what you want. Not me."

"Of course I want you," Hannibal insists. He gets to his feet, only wincing slightly.

"I'm not doing this anymore," Will says. "I love you. God, I love you. But I can't keep hurting you. Even if that's what it would take to keep this, I can't." He swallows. "I can't."

"Will-"

It's cheating, maybe, for him to just walk out like this, considering the way that Hannibal is limping and can't keep up. Will does it anyway, snagging a shirt blindly on his way out, not caring which of them it belongs to. He's half a block away before he bothers putting it on, and half a mile before he calls a cab.

His house is dark and quiet when he gets there. He stares at it in the sunset light as the cab drives away and leaves him standing there, alone. Someone from the department brought his car back and parked it in the driveway. That was nice of them.

The house feels dead without the dogs.

Will lets himself in, kicks off his shoes, and curls up on the bare mattress in his living room. He leaves the front door wide open in invitation.

If the Ripper comes for him tonight, he won't have to keep thinking about how much he'd loved taking that knife to Hannibal's skin.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Specific warnings: Blood, bloodplay, discussion of knifeplay and breathplay and the messy aftermath thereof.

Hannibal is being deliberately terrible at s&m for Hannibal reasons. Do not emulate Hannibal. Hannibal is not a role model.

Uwasa

Chapter Summary

> "You shouldn't have gone home," Beverly scolds. "You *knew* the Ripper was probably watching your house. What if he'd been waiting for you?"
>
> "I can't hide from him forever," Will says, because if he tells her that was the whole point, he really will end up in protective custody - probably under suicide watch.

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the long wait between chapters! In the last month I've had travel, a death in the family, illness, legal trouble and a couple other issues. I'm going to try to get back in the weekly groove.

Will has never felt so alone.

When he woke up, the living room was cold from leaving the door open all night, his body stiff with from the temperature and from holding himself so tightly curled. It was the cold bed that had shocked him awake, when he'd reached out instinctively. No Hannibal. No dogs.

No Ripper, because he'd woken up. Woken up in his own home and not in a… a cistern somewhere, or - no, he'd probably kept Miriam Lass somewhere reasonably comfortable. Somewhere isolated enough that a neighbor wouldn't have seen or heard her. She probably didn't have to see or speak to anyone but the Ripper for all the time he had her.

He blames the hollow disappointment in his chest on the absence of his dogs. On the knowledge that Hannibal hadn't come looking for him in the night to try and make up.

If Hannibal did want to find him, he probably wouldn't have thought to look for him here - alone, without telling anyone he was going to a place where a serial killer had recently rifled through his personal effects. Why on earth would anyone think Will would be stupid enough to come back here?

He hasn't called, either. Will puts the phone under his pillow so he won't hear if he does. He thinks he might have the strength to not call back, if he gets a message, but not answering the ring might be different.

There are eggs in the fridge. Will knows from a lifetime of bachelor cooking that they'll still be edible even weeks after purchase, but when he cracks one into a cup to scramble and sniffs it to be sure, the smell makes his stomach clench. It isn't rotten, or anything. It smells like a perfectly good egg. Will still washes it down the drain. He opens the coffee jar instead, and then quickly snaps the lid shut again when that smell hits him, too.

Jesus, what's wrong with him?

He knew this wasn't going to last. Knew Hannibal couldn't possibly feel the way he seemed to think, or that he wouldn't for long, anyway. Will hadn't expected to be the one to reach his limit, first, or to maybe be the less fucked up of the two of them, at least in this one specific way. Still, he shouldn't feel so rocked by his change in circumstance, his sudden solitude.

He makes himself drink a few handfuls of water from the tap. Makes himself shut the open door, though he doesn't lock it. The fireplace looks like an incredible amount of effort. He stares at the space heater for a few minutes before grabbing an extra blanket instead and curling up again on the bed, instead of turning it on. It feels better to be cold.

He could go get the dogs, later. If he's going to be home, he might as well. He's pretty sure the Ripper wouldn't hurt them, now, especially if Will doesn't put up a fight.

*

It's Beverly who finds him resting on the running board of a sheriff's SUV. The bulk of the vehicle is a useful shield against the light and noise and human presence swirling around the crime scene. He's been done with his reconstruction for almost twenty minutes, but either they haven't been able to find him or no one's wanted to talk to him. He has no idea where Jack went.

"Hey there, stranger," she says, settling in next to him. "You doing okay?"

"Thirteen days of quiet," he says. "I go home for one night-"

"This isn't on you," Beverly says with urgent sincerity. "Will, you can't blame yourself because a crazy person is stalking you."

"I go home for one night," Will repeats, a little louder this time. "There's a body found within 18 hours of me walking through the door. So he was either camped out, watching the house, or he has a camera or some other surveillance device covering the house or - I don't know, hell, it could be on a road a mile or more away - it's not like there'd be a lot of traffic for him to filter out."

Beverly doesn't say anything, at first, just tilting her head and looking out toward the distant highway. "This is me," she finally says, "not asking where you've been for two weeks."

Will snorts. "Thanks for not asking."

"I mean, I get that you're paranoid. I'd be paranoid, too. Hell, I'd be shacked up with six bodyguards and a couple of snipers-"

"I'm not telling the Bureau where I was," Will tells her. "Not when every damn detail of this investigation keeps ending up all over the internet."

It's Beverly's turn to make an undignified noise. "You know where ol' Freddie thinks you've been, right?"

Will groans and leans forward to hide his face in his hands. "I've been avoiding her site. It's bad for my blood pressure."

"You need to know, though. People are going to bring it up."

"I can guess," Will mutters. "Knowing her, she's probably writing in lurid detail about how I've been playing house with the Chesepeake Ripper the whole time."

A hand lands on his shoulder. When he peeks out from between his fingers, Beverly is smiling at him. "Time for better gossip," she prompts. "You don't have to be specific, but give me a hint at where you disappeared to? I've got five bucks on it with the guys. Brian thinks you went all anarcho-primativist on us, or something. Running around in the woods somewhere eating berries and raw fish."

Will can't help laughing at the mental image, and at the sheer contrast with reality. There had been raw fish, sure, but cut into flowers and fed to him by hand in a feather bed. The laugh dies abruptly in his throat at the sense memory of Hannibal's fingertips against his lips and the way the morning light had picked out silvery highlights in his hair.

"Jimmy put a few bucks on you shaving the scruff and going on the drag circuit."

Of course he did. "And you?"

"*I* figure you were barricaded in with Mr. Broad Handspan, somewhere." His face must do something without his permission, because Beverly's hand on his shoulder slides down to cup his bicep and she leans closer. "You were, weren't you?"

"Seriously, Beverly, don't tell anyone," he insists. "I'm trying to keep him out of this."

"I ought to make you cover my bet," She complains, then smiles a little. "I'm not going to tattle, Will. I didn't out you either, you know? Not even to Jimmy, who would probably *actually* kiss me for gossip like that. I put my fiver down that you were sleeping at the kennels with your dogs."

Will breathes out slowly and makes himself relax. "Thanks."

"You shouldn't have gone home," Beverly scolds. "You *knew* the Ripper was probably watching your house. What if he'd been waiting for you?"

"I can't hide from him forever," Will says, because if he tells her that was the whole point, he really will end up in protective custody - probably under suicide watch.

"Will!" Jack shouts from somewhere on the other side of the SUV.

Will rolls his eyes, making Beverly grin, and gets to his feet. "Over here, Jack," he calls.

Beverly excuses herself to go check over the body and surroundings with a fine tooth comb, now that Will has done his thing. He makes himself stand up before Jack gets to him, trying not to look weak. As a result, he's looking down, trying to knock dried mud off his pants, when Jack and someone else round the back end of the truck.

He knows it's Hannibal before he even sees him, his presence so distinctive and familiar. Maybe it was a faint hint of cologne on the air, or the pattern of his footsteps that gave him away, or maybe it's just Will's damned luck.

"What have you got for me," Jack says, without bothering to acknowledge the elephant in the room. Will keeps his eyes down, only occasionally darting to glance at Hannibal's reflection in the dark window of the SUV.

"Uh," he starts, shuffling and fiddling with his glasses while he gets his thoughts together, trying to shove Hannibal's watchful presence to the back of his mind. "Well, it's hard to get much detail on the body itself just yet. Once they have the rest cut away I'll have to take another look. For now… the preliminary report indicates what he's wrapped up in is, ah, human skin. And other tissue - intestine, mostly, split open and all stitched together by hand. Someone put a lot of work into this." He glances at Jack, who's frowning, and his eyes touch on Hannibal's face for just a moment. There's a brief moment of contact, and then *Hannibal* is the one to look away, eyes quickly averted down and away.

He looks miserable.

He's also wearing a scarf, despite the mild weather. Will wonders how he's explaining that one. He wonders what Hannibal is even doing here. Did Jack call him in, or did he hear about the murder and show up hoping Will would be there and unable to run away or cause a scene?

Will clears his throat and forces his eyes down, again. "From what I can tell without moving the body… well, the skin tone and texture is pretty consistent. There's, um, only skin from one hand. Only half a face." He makes himself look up at Jack. "I think we're looking at what's left of Caleb Crane."

"The other half of the man from the dance studio?" Hannibal asks. When Will's eyes dart up to his face again, Hannibal is nodding at Jack. "Jack was kind enough to give me a summary," he explains, as if they haven't talked over every last detail of every last case. Well, at least he's keeping things on the downlow. He'd probably consider it a breach of etiquette to fuck and tell.

"Why are you here?" Will asks before he can stop himself. He hopes he didn't sound too desperate, but from the look Jack is shooting him he's not sure. Hannibal doesn't look at him at all, turning his body half away in a clear flinch, until Will is staring at his profile.

"I asked him here," Jack says. "Considering your reaction to the last few crime scenes I thought you could use some support."

"I haven't been Dr. Lector's patient for a while, now," Will points out. "I'm also a goddamned adult capable of dealing with my own problems-"

"Could have fooled me," Jack interrupts.

"Oh, for god's sake," Will mutters. "Look, can we just talk about the body? We won't get an ID until we get him out of there. I could see shape through some of the thinner sections of tissue - not clearly, but enough to establish height, weight, probably sex - the basics. The Ripper picked someone small, probably because there was only so much of Crane to go around."

"He's tied up, then?" Hannibal says, sounding intrigued. "With the remains of the previous victim?"

"No," Will says. "He's not bound. Not restrained. Swaddled, maybe. It's…" He trails off and closes his eyes, picturing the man bundled up in the fetal position, the Ripper carefully stitching skin and sinew around him. "It's a caul, or a cocoon. It's...protection, or camouflage, something to keep him safe, at least for now."

"In many traditions around the world, birth within a caul is a sign of great fortune to come, or great powers. Charlemagne was said to have been born that way. And Napoleon." When Will opens his eyes Hannibal is watching him intently, carefully. Their eyes meet for a long moment, until they both look away. "Then again," he says dryly, "in my homeland, such children are said to grow to be undying monsters set to prey upon the living, so the possible symbolism is less than clear."

Jack doesn't seem to notice the tension between them. He's more focused on the case, as usual. "Or you said it could be a cocoon. If it is, what's he trying to turn our victim into?"

Oh, Jesus. "It's going to be me again," Will says quietly. Wrapped up tight inside the Ripper's own flesh, sheltered and hidden and - and transforming. Maturing. "Fuck." He turns, nearly bumping into Jack as he does the same, and dodging around him to head back toward the body. The team has lifted it into a body bag, leathery membrane intact. "Cut it open," he tells Zeller when he gets close enough.

"We're not done," Zeller tells him. "I don't want to breach it until we get to the lab."

"If you don't, I will," Will tells him, pulling out his pocket knife. If someone tries to take it away from him, he thinks he could get through the tissue with his hands.

Zeller makes a distressed noise and waves him frantically back. "Fine, okay, cool it," he says, sounding frustrated but clearly acquiescing. "Get the camera guy over here, first."

Jack and Hannibal have caught up with him by the time the photographer is ready, and they all stand around staring as Zeller neatly and gingerly cuts through the line of stitching holding two of the larger panels of tissue together. The line opens up along the abdomen, diagonal from hip to breast. Will smells the faint spice of the damned flowers before they start spilling from the opening.

"Shit," Zeller says in surprise, pressing against the mass of escaping sweet william flowers with one gloved hand, trying to keep them from flying away with the breeze. There's so many blossoms crammed in there that they're trying to escape under their own power. "Zip this thing up or we're going to lose evidence."

Will steps back, letting the people who still have gloves on get the body wrapped up and secured in the van. He wanders away from the crowd and half sits, half falls against a squad car, far enough from the scene that he shouldn't be disturbing anything.

Did the Ripper follow him to Hannibal's after all? Does he know what Will did to him? Is that what triggered this murder, rather than Will returning to his home? Or is the killer extrapolating, somehow - does he just understand Will well enough to know just how terrified Will is of becoming what he hunts?

Either way, if the Ripper does catch him - when the Ripper does come for him - his goal won't be to kill Will. It won't be to keep him drugged up and tucked away somewhere, like poor Miriam Lass. The Ripper wants to bundle him up tight and take him somewhere safe, yes, but not to keep him locked away forever.

Transformation. Transformation into what? If Will is right about the killer's level of empathy and intuition, his ability to see and understand, then it stands to reason that he's like Will, at least in part. And if he's like Will…

Will could be like him.

*

It's a long time before Will really notices anything that isn't happening inside his own head. What finally catches his attention is Hannibal's voice, speaking in a hushed tone just on the other side of the squad car. He presses his palms against his eyes for a moment and braces himself to get to his feet, but Jack's voice makes him freeze in place.

"-clearly an assault," he's saying. "I can make sure it's handled discretely, but you still need to make a report."

"I assure you, I'm quite fine," Hannibal says. He sounds as calm and dignified as ever, but he's keeping his voice low.

"I know ligature marks when I see them," Jack insists, matching Hannibal's tone. "Someone choked you. Someone bit you, tied you up. I...know it can be hard to talk about, but this is what we're here for, when it comes down to it. Let me help you with this, make sure you're safe."

"I'm entirely safe," Hannibal tells him. "I was entirely safe throughout. At the risk of perhaps providing too much information… Jack, nothing that was done to me was done without my consent."

There's a long pause. Will has a brief fantasy about slitting his wrists with his pocket knife before they notice him, but it's interrupted by Jack's awkward throat clearing, "I didn't mean

to pry."

"Not at all," Hannibal says. "I appreciate your concern, Jack."

"Well...good. Good." The last word is decisive, as if Jack is slamming the lid shut on this whole conversation. Sure enough, Will hears his heavy footsteps tromping away, back toward the bulk of the forensic team.

Will breathes out a long sigh of relief once he's gone, only to choke on it when Hannibal comes around the side of the car and looks down at him. His lack of surprise at finding Will here suggests Hannibal knew where he was all along.

"He's right, you know," Will tells him. "You should file a report."

"For what?" Hannibal asks. He adjusts the scarf that had slipped partway down his throat, probably what caused Jack's discrete interrogation. "The only complaint I could possibly make about my partner is regarding his absence."

Will bites his lip and looks at the ground, focusing on a little green conehead that's hopped away from Hannibal's feet only to struggle in the entangled high grass, panicked by the proximity of something big and warm-blooded. "Did Jack call you, or did you call Jack?"

"Jack called me," Hannibal tells him. "He told me he needed my expertise and asked me to come to a crime scene. If he'd mentioned that you would also be here, or what he wanted my expertise for, I would have called you first and given you the chance to refuse my presence." He bends, and he must have been following Will's gaze on the insect, because he reaches down and carefully lifts the little grasshopper, cupping it gingerly in his fingers.

Will is about to say something in the creature's defense, but Hannibal just examines it for a moment, then lets it go, unharmed, into a low patch of clover before watching it spring away from them.

"Let me give you a ride?" Hannibal asks. "Jack and the others will be here for quite a while. There's no sense in you being stuck here as well. I can drop you wherever you're staying, for rest and something to eat. They'll be calling you in for the autopsy results soon enough."

"I don't really think we should be alone together," Will says quietly.

"We will have to be, if we're ever going to have a conversation about this," Hannibal points out. "Or had you intended, once again, to disappear from my life for my own benefit without asking if that's what I want or need, or allowing me any sort of say in the matter?"

Will sighs and looks away, but he accepts the hand Hannibal offers him, warm and smooth and familiar. He lets himself be pulled to his feet, and then pulled closer, until their shoulders brush. He lets his hand be held too long.

They have to pull over less than a mile from the crime scene. Hannibal didn't think to bring lubricant, but that's never stopped them before.

*

"It isn't actually the pain," Hannibal tells him, once they're back in his kitchen and he's pouring out tea. Will is having a hard time dragging his eyes away from Hannibal's bruised and bitten lips. "Or I should say, the sensation of pain isn't the primary reason I enjoy it so much when you hurt me."

Will just blinks at him, trying to figure that statement out. He watches as Hannibal stirs sugar into the cup without asking and slides it to him on its saucer, their fingers brushing as Will takes it. "Is it more about control, then?"

He hums, thoughtfully. "To a degree, perhaps. My own ability to take whatever you want to give me. My own ability to encourage you to want to give me what I want to take."

Will snorts indelicately and takes a long sip of near-scalding tea, enjoying the burn and the bitter complexity as much as the sweet. "You have to know I'd do anything you want me to," Will tells him. "In bed, I mean."

Hannibal's mouth quirks. "Only in bed?"

Will hides behind another sip of tea.

"To be honest," Hannibal tells him, his tone soft, "it isn't the pain. It's you."

"So you'd be just as happy if I wanted us to be sweet and gentle," Will asks, pretty sure the answer will be no. Hannibal would get bored with that, surely. At least if it were the only option on the menu. "Or if I wanted to be the one on my knees for a change?"

That makes Hannibal's eyes flash in a way Will wasn't expecting. His mouth goes suddenly dry despite the drink in his hand.

"Really?" He asks, and puts the cup aside, ready to stand up and go to Hannibal right here and now.

"Yes," Hannibal tells him. "Very much so. But that isn't quite what I meant. I enjoy seeing you uninhibited. Dangerous and unashamed. You are at your most beautiful and fascinating when you are at your wildest, your darkest. I enjoy being allowed to witness that. And you enjoy being seen."

Will sits back down, eyes wide.

"I enjoy being the object of your passion. And I enjoy knowing that I've overwhelmed your ever-present internal censors, until you don't care if the facet of yourself you've allowed to reign is socially acceptable, is safe, is allowed. You spend so much of your time so afraid of yourself, Will. I want to give you respite from that. I want you to always know that everything about you is loved, accepted, desired."

Jesus.

Will's heart is pounding like fight or flight is kicking in. He squirms in his seat, wanting to protest, but Jesus, Hannibal's face, his eyes, his voice, every little piece of trace evidence is screaming his sincerity. "Not everything about me is loveable." He tries, weakly.

"Everything," Hannibal insists, feverish in his intensity. He steps forward then and cups Will's face between his warm palms. "My dear Will. Darling boy-"

Will surges up to meet his mouth, unable to stop himself. He clutches and tugs at Hannibal until the hands gripping his hips lift with surprising strength, until Will's ass is resting on the counter and their mouths are properly at a level. "I'm sorry," Will breathes into him. "I'm sorry, what I said last night-"

Hannibal shushes him, then renders him unable to speak for long moments. "Will you let me take you upstairs? Will you let me be gentle with you, show you-"

"Yes," Will pants, suddenly knowing he's never wanted anything more in his life. "God, what the hell did I ever do to deserve you?"

Chūjitsu

Chapter Summary

> Will hasn't been in a real fight in years. When he was younger - in college, on the force, younger than that even - he lost a lot of fights. He was always more afraid of hurting someone else than getting hurt, himself, and it usually left him the one bruised and bleeding when it was all over.
>
> His last fight had ended in a draw, with his attacker running away and Will too shaken to immediately give chase.
>
> Hannibal had nearly died.

Chapter Notes

> Yes, this did grow by another projected chapter. Things keep expanding and I am apparently a bad estimator of word count.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Yowza, Mr. Graham," Beverly says, circling him slowly as he joins them at the table. "Look at you, in pants that fit and everything."

He should have known leaving the jacket and tie in the car wasn't going to help. He can feel Beverly's gaze on him as he picks up the autopsy report and leafs through it, raking him from head to toe. Price is looking between them, as eager as Princess hoping for crumbs.

This is one of the biggest drawbacks of working with other investigators. At least Zeller doesn't seem to have any fucks to give about his wardrobe.

"You ironed that shirt, didn't you? Oh my god," Beverly asks, running her hand from his shoulder to his elbow.

"Do we have to have another talk about the sexual harassment policy?" Zeller asks her, earning himself a pen thrown at his head. Price chuckles to himself, and when Will looks his way, waggles his eyebrows.

Beverly sidles up next to him like she thinks she's being subtle. "Seriously though, hot date later?"

He's actually grateful when Jack storms in behind him, killing the playful mood. Beverly nudges him anyway, but Will just shoots her a glare and holds his finger to his lips.

"What have you got for me," Jack asks them. Feeling mildly guilty, Will reads quickly, hoping that if he can internalize enough of the report, Jack will assume he's been here a lot longer than he actually has.

"Victim is Henry Warren, age twenty-three, African American, cause of death appears to be having his heart cut out and his stomach sliced open," Zeller rattles off. "Definitely alive for the removal, obviously not alive for long after that."

"Why put the heart in the stomach?" Price asks

"Fastest way to a man's heart is supposed to be through the stomach," Beverly comments.

"Only if the knife is long enough," Will mutters, earning an unhappy glance from Jack and an appreciative one from Price. "It's not his heart, is it?" He hasn't gotten to the part of the report where the tissue typing will be, but Zeller is pretty thorough and after the heart in the food trough at the zoo, it makes sense.

"Way to ruin my big reveal," Zeller complains, tapping the tray where the heart sits, waiting. "There's more, though - the flowers in the cocoon thing? More of them in here."

"Aw, he has sweet William in his heart," Price says. The look he sends Will and the sing-song tone of his voice suggest he's trying to include Will in a joke, diffuse his fear, maybe normalize the situation. It might have worked if Will felt about the situation like a normal person would. Instead, he feels a bit like he's in middle school, which is at least as alarming as Price probably thinks the effigy murder must be.

"Whose heart is it?" Jack asks.

"No match, yet," Beverly tells him. "DNA isn't on file and nobody's turned up with one missing. We have a second victim out there."

Will stares at the heart, frowning, an inkling of an idea itching at the back of his mind. "Jack, have they been able to get anything out of Miriam about where she was kept?"

"She doesn't remember much of anything. Lights and shadows, she says. The smell of flowers." Will looks up at that. "Not this kind. I checked."

"Her tox panel was a nightmare," Zeller tells them. "Benzodiazepines were the least of it, he had her on a whole cocktail of brain scramblers. It's going to take a while for her doctors to figure out what all the interactions might have been, above and beyond the expected effects of the drugs, but interrupting memory formation would have been basically a given."

"You shouldn't have had access to that," Jack says, eyes narrowing. "That's confidential patient information."

Zeller shrugs. "I went and asked her. She said anything that would help catch the guy, she wasn't going to be shy about it, so I had a conference with her primary."

Will blinks. He hasn't even considered talking to Lass himself. He probably should.

He doesn't want to. He also doesn't want to examine why he doesn't want to, or the hot angry spike that runs through him at the thought of talking to her about the Ripper. Maybe he can talk it out with Hannibal, later.

"Tough cookie," Price says, approvingly. "Why are we talking about this, now, though?"

"He's good at hiding what he's doing. He managed to hide three murders from us by mocking the MO of another killer. He hid them so well we wouldn't have tied them to him at all, if he hadn't pinned his confession to the body in the greenhouse." Will rubs at his chin, which feels weird and prickly without his usual short beard. "He hid Lass for over two years."

"He was in another state when he killed Marissa Shurr and the Boyle siblings," Jack points out.

"Who's to say this heart didn't come from another state, too?" Will says, jabbing a finger at it. "We've been assuming he goes dormant during the periods when we don't see bodies, but what if we're just not seeing the bodies?"

"We're looking at twenty kills already," Jack says. "You want to assign him more."

"Twenty-one," Price says, nudging the tray with the heart. "Whoever lost this isn't going anywhere without it."

"Will could be right," Beverly argues, picking up some of Will's agitation. "We never did find Nick Boyle. The Ripper made him disappear. What did he do with him? What's he doing with these possible other bodies?"

Will swallows against a sudden rush of saliva and turns his head away from the open body on the table, away from the heart on its platter. "It all starts with Hobbs."

"What do you mean?" Jack asks.

"He was fascinated with Hobbs. There was something about that case that caught his attention - if he'd just wanted to poke at you, he could have done it any time over the preceding two years."

"He was fascinated with you," Beverly says.

"He may have noticed me because of Hobbs," Will tells them. "He was paying attention to Hobbs. He's probably the one who made that damned phone call. We always figured it was the copy cat."

"Why Hobbs, though?" Jimmy asks, looking confused.

Will doesn't say anything. He just points at the open cavity of the dead man's abdomen.

Zeller looks suddenly horrified.

"Oh," Beverly says, behind him.

"They're not surgical trophies," Jack says, voice dull.

"Pigs," Price suddenly says. Everybody rips their eyes off of the body to look at him. He nods in Will's direction. "You said he saw his victims as pigs."

Will crosses his arms over his chest, feeling a little cold in the sterile concrete and steel room. "Maybe don't tell Miriam about the cannibalism angle," he tells Jack quietly. "She has enough on her-" plate. "Mind."

"You think he was feeding them to her?" Beverly asks, sounding outraged. Jack just looks pale.

"From what we've seen of his sense of humor?" Will rubs his eyebrow. "He'd have thought it was fucking hilarious."

*

It takes Will a few moments to find Hannibal in the crowd once he gets to the venue; his eye is instinctively looking for a bright color, an eyecatching pattern, but when he does find the man his suit is unusually subdued, all soft material and subtle, unadventurous colors. Will feels his heart tighten - he'd told Hannibal he wanted to do date things, couple things, but that he wasn't ready for everyone to know about them. It looks like Hannibal had taken that to heart and tried his best to blend. Not that Will thinks it's working; it would take more than a change of suits to make Hannibal pass for ordinary, and he seems to have already drawn a few admirers.

"Sorry I'm late," he tells Hannibal as he slides into place beside him. The young blond man Hannibal was talking to glares at him, even as Hannibal turns to greet him.

"Will, you made it," Hannibal says, sounding surprised. He also sounds… less than happy. Will frowns as Hannibal excuses himself from his conversation. "Here, let's get you a drink," he says, leading Will out of the main exhibit hall and into a side room with a small bar.

As soon as they're away from the crowd, Hannibal seems to lighten. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I didn't mean to be so long. It was hard to get away from work."

"You were just in time to rescue me from a dreadful and tedious conversation," Hannibal tells him. He bends his head to scent Will behind his ear, then leans past him to gesture at the bartender. "Good evening, miss. The amarone for me, and the single barrel for my companion. Rocks, I think?" He glances to Will to confirmation, and he nods. It's warm in here, with all the people, and it will slow him down if he starts sipping every time something makes him nervous or uncomfortable.

He lets Hannibal pay for the drinks, just like he let him buy the tickets. It makes his fingertips itch, but he knows it will make Hannibal happy. It's the same reason he acquiesces easily to

Hannibal's subtle nudge toward the main hall and the exhibits there.

"You know," Will tells him, "I'm actually not even sure where you've brought me." They stop in front of a glass case containing an arrangement of ornate fans, and Will peers around until he finds a placard. Most of it is in Spanish. Or maybe Portuguese? Will's Spanish isn't great, but enough of what he's trying to read is completely foreign to make him doubt he's looking at either Standard Spanish or the Norteño dialect he's more familiar with from his time moving around the gulf south.

"You didn't ask. You simply trusted yourself into my hands and showed up when and where I told you." Hannibal says, looking pleased. "In a very nice suit, I might add. You look marvelous."

Will snorts and takes a drink to hopefully avoid a blush. He doesn't tell Hannibal he bought the thing soon after they started sleeping together in mingled hope and terror of a night like this. It's probably obvious, anyway. "So, what are we here to see?"

"Flamenco," Hannibal tells him. When Will's eyebrows go up, he shoots him an amused but chiding look, as if Will is a child who's done something amusing but slightly rude. "I think you'll enjoy it."

"Sure, fancy European dancing, that sounds like me."

"The folk art of a marginalized and often threatened minority, performed extemporaneously in pairs or small groups, music and dance entirely improvised with the intent of expressing and sharing the emotion of the guitarist and dancer." Hannibal turns his head to speak to Will's reflection in the glass case. "This troupe of performers are from the province of Cádiz, in southern Spain, and all trace their ancestry to the gitano people who invented the artform, with influence from the Moors and Jews, before it was appropriated and 'refined' by the mainstream Spanish musical culture, pared down and tamed, blended with more regimented outside traditions of dance and performance." He smiles and lifts his glass to his lips, but only to smell, rather than taste. "It's rather raw, in some ways, and performed here minimalistically, without most of the modern trappings. I thought you'd like it more than the opera, in any case."

Will swallows. "If it's half as good as you make it sound, I'm sure I will." He watches Hannibal take a slow sip of his wine, which might be the darkest he's ever seen and clings to the glass like blood. He thinks it might be the lighting making it looks so inky black, like the water in Hannibal's sink had looked before the turned the lights on. "I wouldn't fight you on opera or the symphony or whatever else you usually do for fun."

"No?" Hannibal asks. He seems happy with his wine selection, or maybe it's Will's admission. "Perhaps when the season starts."

"Not opening night," Will cautions. "I don't think I'm up for that."

"You are stronger than you think, Will," Hannibal says. "I hope you will take me up on the offer, eventually. I'm happily anticipating the scandal."

"Would it be scandalous for you to arrive with a man on your arm?" Will asks. "Or will they all be shocked to see you so obviously slumming it?"

He smiles when Hannibal's mouth does the little pucker thing it does sometimes instead of laughing aloud. "Scandalous for me to arrive with anyone on my arm at all," Hannibal tells him. "I'm rather notorious in that circle for my devotion to bachelorhood. But no, I was imagining what you might say or do when presented with the entitled and intrusive interest of a particular class of wealthy matron or status-obsessed corporate psychopath."

"I wouldn't embarrass you," Will protests.

"No, you wouldn't," he agrees brightly. "I'd enjoy the fallout very much, I think." He runs his hand across Will's shoulder and down the ridge of his spine, the way Will would soothe the hackles of an agitated hound. He's embarrassed at how well it seems to work on him, until he's relaxed against the hand at the small of his back.

He wants to kiss Hannibal. In front of all these people, he wants to kiss him until he can't stand up. "Can I try your wine?" he asks, instead. "I've never had - I can't say it like you said it."

"Amarone," Hannibal says, all round vowels and soft rolled consonants, which was really the point of the question. He hands the glass to Will, who takes a smell, and a swirl, and a sip, not conscious that he's copying Hannibal's usual method of tasting until he sees the other man smile.

It smells a bit like raisins and pipe tobacco. The flavor is strong, complicated, and very dry. "I've never had anything like that," he confesses, handing the glass back.

"The grapes are allowed to dry partially in the sun, intensifying and concentrating the flavor," Hannibal tells him. "There are related wines that are sweeter and more popular. I was a bit surprised to see such a lovely vintage on the shelf, here."

Hannibal steers him with gentle pressure from his fingertips until they reach another case, this one full of black and white photographs of small, dark women in skirts that seemed to be constructed from double the necessary amount of cloth.

Something catches his eye, in the bright reflection of the glass case, and he turns to see if he's imagining it.

No, the blond man Hannibal was talking to when Will arrived is definitely staring at them. Glaring at them. He doesn't seem shy at being caught at it, either - he returns Will's look with narrowed eyes, his fingers white around his glass to the point Will is a little surprised it hasn't cracked.

He finishes off his own drink and turns back to the photos, but he's conscious of the other man's stare through Hannibal's brief lecture on traditional costuming. "The guy I rescued you from," he says, when Hannibal pauses. "The tedious conversation."

"Ah," Hannibal says, and glances up, probably using the case as a mirror just as Will had. "Very unfortunate to run into him here."

"Who is he?" Will asks. When he sees the man is still staring, he steps in closer against Hannibal's side.

"I'm afraid I can't say."

"A patient, then."

"If he were a patient, or perhaps a former patient I had to refer elsewhere, I would not be able to confirm it," Hannibal tells him while looking absently away.

"Ah," Will says, echoing Hannibal's earlier sound of understanding. "Dangerous?"

Hannibal tilts his head and raises an eyebrow in a way that says 'maybe,' as clearly as words would have.

"He doesn't seem to like you much."

"Quite the contrary, actually," Hannibal says quietly, ducking his head a bit. "I rather imagine the evil looks are aimed at you, rather than me."

The sudden rush of possessive heat that runs through him doesn't make any sense. Hannibal referred the man away. He fled his company and, now that Will thinks about his behavior since he arrived, seems to have been keeping Will between himself and the other man like a shield.

Still, he doesn't like the idea of someone else looking at Hannibal like that. Wanting Hannibal like that. Maybe it's something to do with his own insecurity in Hannibal's affections.

"Has he been harassing you?" Will asks, trying to think like a member of law enforcement instead of a jealous lover.

"I have not seen him in some time," Hannibal tells Will. "The last I had heard of him, he was...unavoidably detained, for a period, and would have been unable to return to Baltimore."

"Detained," Will repeats. It doesn't matter if it were prison or the psych ward. This man wouldn't have ended up in either if he hadn't been judged a threat by someone in a position of authority.

"Possibly because of repeated failures to take 'no' as an answer," Hannibal says, as casual as if he isn't talking around something that, from his vague phrasing, could mean anything from stalking to sexual assault. At Will's concerned look, he shakes his head slightly. "Though if I hadn't aggressively cut ties, he might have worked himself up to the attempt."

Darkness flickers around them, and for a moment, Will thinks it's happening inside his own mind, a mirror of his dark thoughts. It registers a breath later as Hannibal drains the last of his wine beside him that it was more likely an indication that the show is going to start soon.

"I'm going to get a bit of water before we find our seats," Hannibal tells him. "I think I've had enough wine on an empty stomach."

Will tilts his glass so that the ice tinks forlornly against the side. "Grab me a refill?"

"You'll hardly have time-"

"Watch me."

"That's a terrible disservice to a fine whiskey."

"So get me a cheaper one."

Hannibal's brow wrinkles slightly. "I will not," he says, sounding outraged.

Will laughs and, on impulse, catches Hannibal by the arm and leans in to peck him lightly on his downturned lips, which twitch up into a smile as Will pulls away. Will maintains contact with his eyes and hand until he comes to the end of his reach and he has to let Hannibal go. "Go on."

There's a short line at the bar, other people with the same idea in their heads. Will sees Hannibal step into the queue and compliment the woman ahead of him on her dress. He should be occupied for a few minutes.

Will makes a beeline for the patient, who sees him coming and seems to read his mood, his shoulders coming up, tight with tension.

"Hi," Will says, coming to a stop just a little too far inside the man's bubble of personal space. He's not bad looking, younger than Will with thick blonde hair and a reasonably athletic build. He's also taller than Will, but Will knows there's a lot more important in a fight than just bulk and reach. "I'm Will," he says. "Hannibal wouldn't tell me your name, so I'm asking politely."

"Uh, Christian," he says reflexively, and then seems to remember he's bigger than Will and stands up straighter, recovering somewhat from Will's off-putting opening.

"Chris, he's not interested in you and you're making him uncomfortable."

He watches as Christian bristles, taking a half step back in rejection of the idea and then a full step forward when he realizes he's stepped back. He leans toward Will, trying to loom, to use Will's own trick against him, which suggests how well it had worked in the first place in setting him off guard. "You don't get to speak for Dr. Lecter."

"I do, actually. Because he doesn't want to talk to you," Will tells him, keeping his voice pitched low so it won't carry. "And because he's mine. If you keep bothering him, tonight or at any time in the future, I'm going to step in again. You'll wish I hadn't."

"You don't deserve him," he tells Will, cliched as anything.

"Yeah, probably not." Will agrees. He takes a step back, because Hannibal has just walked out of the bar with a glass in each hand. Will makes eye contact with him across the room and smiles. "But he has funny taste, and he picked me, so take a hike, Chris." Without bothering to spare another look for Christian, Will crosses the room to Hannibal's side. He takes the whiskey from Hannibal's hand and tosses it back like a shot, then steals Hannibal's water glass to chase it.

"Dare I ask?" Hannibal ventures once Will has handed back his drink.

"We were just talking." Will's not sure he wants to admit to what he said.

"I leave you alone for five minutes and you cause a scene," Hannibal says, so fucking delighted his eyes are dancing. He touches Will's elbow lightly and leads him toward the theater.

"No scene," Will assures him. "Chris and I just had a quiet conversation."

"Oh," Hannibal says, "he always hated being called that."

"Yeah," Will says. "I know."

*

Hannibal turns out to have been right about the show. The theater is tiny and intimate, the dancers mere feet from them throughout the performance. Will spends most of the evening entirely entranced. When he surfaces at the end of the show, Hannibal is holding his hand and watching him like he's the one who's been dancing for the last two hours. He opens his mouth to make some kind of stupid joke about it, but Hannibal is kissing him before he can get the words out.

"You are lovely," Hannibal murmurs as he pulls back.

"If you just want to stare at me in the dark with Spanish guitar in the background, we can stay home next time and put on an album," Will finally manages.

Hannibal ends up kissing him again, until there's hardly anyone left in the theater. When they stand up to go, one of the performers claps and whistles at them from the side of the stage. Will drags Hannibal away before he can finish turning to give her a bow.

Once they're outside in the cool night air and the small crowd is dispersing, Will lets Hannibal push him back between the wall and a big potted plant, mostly hidden from view. They kiss like teenagers for what feels like a very long time, until Will's shirt is untucked and Hannibal's tie undone. Will is sure that his own hair is a mess; Hannibal's just looks artfully mussed.

"Come home with me," Hannibal breathes into his mouth. "Don't sleep apart from me another night."

"Yes." Will is helpless to give any other answer. "God, yes. Will you fuck me? I haven't been able to stop thinking about it since you said-"

Hannibal bites him on the jaw. "Yes. Yes, darling, anything."

"It's been-" he squeezes his eyes shut and pants as Hannibal's mouth works over his throat. "Jesus, it's been a long time. You'll have to be gentle with me." He shudders at the feel of Hannibal's teeth over his pulse. "Or not. You could be not-gentle with me."

"My car is in the garage," Hannibal tells him, and peels him off of the wall, pulling him along by their joined hands, which is good, because Will has pretty much forgotten how to walk. They pass a few other people dressed up from the show, chatting or smoking or waiting for taxis, and the mix of amused and scandalized looks they get suggests it's pretty obvious what they've been doing and what they're going to do next.

Hannibal's car is on the first level. Will leaves him there with another kiss and jogs up the stairs. His car is near the top, because all the good spaces were gone by the time he got to the venue. It should be safe enough for the night, but he needs his bag from the back or when Jack calls about the case in the morning he's going to be dragged out of the house for his files.

He's halfway down again when he hears raised voices coming from below. He doesn't register it as an actual issue until he come out of the stairwell and sees Hannibal backed up against the side of a white van, hands up and palms out and speaking calmly while Christian pulls at his wrist and the sleeve of his jacket.

Will drops his bag and breaks into a run, closing the space between himself and Hannibal as fast as he can. He doesn't bother shouting a warning or trying to scare Christian into backing off - just skids to a stop behind and beside him and grabs him by the arm that's touching Hannibal. He gets in a good stomp kick against the side of Christian's calf just below the knee, and shoves him back by the arm, away from Hannibal. The surprise attack works, sending Christian staggering back with a sound of alarm and pain.

Will punches him in the mouth as hard as he can, then hits him again before he can recover. "You don't touch him," Will says, and a part of him is surprised by how calm and even his voice sounds. His heart isn't beating any faster now that it was on the way down the stairs.

Will hasn't been in a real fight in years. When he was younger - in college, on the force, younger than that even - he lost a lot of fights. He was always more afraid of hurting someone else than getting hurt, himself, and it usually left him the one bruised and bleeding when it was all over.

His last fight had ended in a draw, with his attacker running away and Will too shaken to immediately give chase. Hannibal had nearly died.

"You don't touch him," Will repeats. He stands between Hannibal and Christian as he watches the man stabilize himself against the hood of Hannibal's car. "Try it one more time, bother him one more time, and I *will* kill you."

Christian rushes him, then, knocking him back against the side of the van so hard it rocks under his weight. Hannibal dodges out of the way until he comes up against a concrete pillar, which he leans against for support.

Will can feel Hannibal's eyes on him as he takes the next hits, solid shots to his abdomen that knock the breath out of him but don't seem to hurt at all. Adrenaline, he thinks, as he shifts his weight, but it doesn't feel like adrenaline. He realizes with dull surprise that he isn't scared, or even angry. He gets himself into position, braces his feet and hip and gets the leverage he needs to shove his attacker back and take him to the ground.

There are shouts echoing in the cavernous space of the half-empty garage, but since none of the voices are Hannibal's, Will doesn't care. He grits his teeth and hits Christian again and again, hits his face and body and takes a few blows in return that he barely feels.

"Will," Hannibal says, cutting through the weird haze over his thoughts, dragging him to the surface like he had at the end of the performance. He didn't even raise his voice. Will looks up and sees him leaning back against the pillar, shoulders slightly bowed. His eyes are glittering in the dim, flickering fluorescent, and there's a strange moment that seems to stretch. Will still has Christian by the collar, his fist pulled back, and he can taste blood in his mouth, but he can't pull his eyes away from Hannibal's.

Will could beat this man to death. He could keep going, keep hitting him, until bone shatters and tendon snaps. Could wrap his hands around the man's vulnerable neck and just hold on until he stops struggling. He doesn't think it would be that hard. From the look on Hannibal's face, mesmerized and darkly pleased, Will doesn't think he'd mind one bit.

He feels a shiver move from his scalp, down his spine, to settle warm and hot in his belly.

"Someone will have called the police," Hannibal says. Reality snaps back into place like a rubber band, and suddenly Will can hear a car alarm going off not far away, the sound near deafening as it echoes through the concrete structure.

Christian isn't done fighting - he grasps at Will as he gets up, trying to roll them over, but he's dazed and out of breath and choking on the blood from a nose that's probably broken. Will finds his feet and staggers toward Hannibal, who reaches out for him.

"No," Will says, voice ragged. "Don't touch me, I can't -" He doesn't have words to articulate it. There's something happening under his skin and he loves it, and he hates it. "You need to go home. I need to go home."

"Don't you run away from me again," Hannibal warns him.

"I'm not," Will says. "I'll call you in the morning. I promise. But if I touch you right now I don't know what I'll do to you."

"I'm quite sure I'd enjoy it," Hannibal tells him, and there's the dark gleam in his eyes, the dark promise in his voice. Will makes his hands into fists so they'll stop shaking.

"I'm not," Will tells him. "Go home. Lock your doors." He backs away until he nearly trips over the man he's wrecked. "And you," he says. "Don't ever let me see you again."

"Fuck you," Christian mutters. But he gets to his feet, and then he runs.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to everyone for their support! Things are on a little more of an even keel, and your comments did a lot to help lift my mood. I really appreciate everyone who's taken time out of their day to say hi or let me know they enjoyed something. I probably wouldn't be writing again if this fandom weren't so full of nice people.

Kagemi

Chapter Summary

> After last night, he's starting to think Hannibal really means it - that he could see the worst inside of Will and still stay. Still love him. *Love him.* If he accepts that, believes it's even possible, then he has to act on it. He has to.
>
> But if he takes Hannibal's hand, he has to let the Ripper go. Quit the bureau, take a long trip with Hannibal somewhere, maybe even move out of state if he can talk Hannibal into it.
>
> Or he has to catch the Chesapeake Ripper, and catch him fast.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will goes home. He doesn't pull over and jerk off in his car.

He doesn't jerk off when he gets inside the door. He still feels heat when he thinks of how Hannibal had looked at him in the dim parking garage, but the itch under his skin isn't exactly sexual. He wanders through the house, straightening things, moving small objects around. Restless, aimless - he needs physical activity - something that will tire his body and quiet his mind.

And he can't jerk off after beating a guy up, even if it wouldn't be about that. That would just be… no, he can't do that.

God, the way Hannibal had *looked at him.*

The only thing Will can compare it to is the memory of Hannibal's eyes while Will had that knife at his throat and oh, dear god, no, he is...he is not going to jerk off tonight. He's *not*, and definitely not over *that*.

Fuck, he misses his dogs. If they were here he could be out in the cool night air throwing sticks and wrestling for balls and ropes. He could run around in circles like an idiot shouting and no one who saw him would think he was insane. He'd have something else to think about, watching them in their simple, easy joy.

He could go pick them up, tomorrow. They'd be so happy to be home. It would make coming and going from Hannibal's more complicated, but he could always actually go through with getting a dogsitter, for nights away, or they could spend more time in Wolf Trap…

What is he thinking? The Ripper is still out there.

He might be able to trust the killer not to target his dogs - and Jesus, what a thought, trust the Ripper - but a dog sitter could be in danger. Hannibal is definitely in danger.

It's the real reason Will doesn't want anyone to know about what's happening between them. Well, he might not want anyone to know, anyway - he doesn't want Jack's nose in his business or Alana's well meaning concern. Or, horror of horrors, Beverly and Price giving him the third degree. They've met Hannibal, after all. There's no way it would pass unremarked. But, no, the main reason, the real reason, is the danger inherent in associating with Will right now.

He'd called the...messages…from the Ripper 'love letters,' without really thinking through what that meant, but the truth of the matter is, he's almost certainly being stalked by a serial murderer who has killed at least twenty people. Except they know, they all know, that Paulette Hale had not been the Chesapeake Ripper's first victim. She hadn't been his second victim. Or his third. He's too good at what he does for those to have been the first. No, the Ripper cut his teeth somewhere else, with a different MO.

How many victims were hiding behind the lack of flashy presentation? How many people had died for anger or self-preservation or just sheer whimsy, instead of being selected as the world's most fucked up art supplies? And what did he do with the others? Was Nick Boyle at the bottom of a lake somewhere, or had the Ripper honored every part of him?

He ends up in the kitchen chopping onion with a knife that feels wrong in his hand. It's a good set - old, and picked up cheap at a thrift shop around the time he moved into the house, but heavy, with a tang that runs the length of the wooden handle. Will takes good care of his knives, because he's that kind of southern boy at heart even now, and you take care of your tools. He knows this knife, but it feels all wrong, because he's gotten used to Hannibal's.

He chops the way Hannibal taught him, standing behind him and guiding his hands on a thousand dollar Japanese blade and working his way through a pile of onions that had filled a huge stockpot, destined for sausage and French onion soup, because Hannibal insisted repetition was the only way to learn how to do it *right*.

Will's cheap, sturdy, old-fashioned tools. Hannibal's hands on his in his mind, guiding them as surely as if he were in the room.

Will's comfort foods used to be mac and cheese in the off-brand box or dry ramen with peanut butter. Instead, he makes confit d'oignons thinking he might have a sandwich with that amazing home-cured ham Hannibal gave him, and when just stirring the confit gets boring he wracks his brain and digs in his freezer and the bottom of his pantry and ends up with shrimp maque choux and carrot salad and then it's two am and what the fuck is he doing.

He puts everything away in the fridge, piles the dishes in the sink, and goes to bed without eating.

Except he can see his kitchen from the bed of he lays on his right side, so he rolls over and squeezes his eyes shut and tries not to feel like the bed is all wrong and the sheets are too rough and he's alone.

The Ripper doesn't come for him in the night.

*

In the morning, he stands in front of the open fridge and realizes everything he made last night can be eaten cold. He looks out the back window at the fields turning green and tries to remember if it's rained this week.

He eats cold ham and a stale bagel over the sink and then goes to sit on the porch. It's just cool enough in the growing light to make him wish he'd put on something over his shorts and t-shirt but not cool enough to make him get up and go back inside. He can hear insects buzzing - faint and subliminal, not like the cacophony he grew up with, but still comfortable. He dozes off for a bit, wakes up, makes coffee, drinks it black, pulls on jeans.

He scoops what's left of a coyote's meal out of his driveway, double bagging it in the trash so nothing will tip the cans when it starts to stink. He washes the rabbit guts off the shovel then puts it away under the steps, ready for the next mess that comes from living close to nature. Then he heads to the shed.

After about two hours of what his dad always called puttering around, Will sits down on an overturned bucket just outside the barn door and puts his head in his hands.

He has to make a decision. Is he pursuing this thing with Hannibal through for as long as he can make it last? He thinks he wants it to be forever. He thinks if it ends it might kill him, if Hannibal changes his mind about him, decides he's not worth it, decides he's not good enough, or wrong in the head, or gets bored. If he goes all in on this and it goes wrong it will destroy him.

It all comes down to whether he believes what Hannibal says, about how he feels. He has to decide if he trusts Hannibal to know his own mind and to be honest with Will about what he wants for their future.

It would mean changes. It would mean changing his life, sure, changing his schedule, his eating habits, but none of that seems hard, really. He can go watch Spanish dancing or sit through the ballet. That's nothing. He can never buy box mac and cheese again and he doesn't think he'll ever miss it.

He can - and here's the first twinge he feels about something specific - he can find new homes for some of his dogs. Reduce the number enough to make living with them and another human being a reasonable proposition. Hannibal has never even suggested it - quite the opposite, actually, with his talk of building a dog run and the book Will found near the fireplace in his study about canine nutrition. He's accepted the dogs as part of Will, the way he's accepted everything about Will. It's a matter of logistics, though. Living in the city, walking them on leashes, even if the two of them always do it together, which just won't always be possible. Taking them to the park twice a week and Hannibal probably wanting to make all their food from scratch, the great big snob.

Just sitting here, entertaining these ideas, making these plans, feels so domestic that it *hurts*. It makes his hands shake and his breath come quick and desperate from how terrifying it is and how much he wants it.

He squeezes his eyes shut and presses the knuckles of his clenched fists to his lips hard enough that one of the cuts from last night opens up. Blood in his mouth, again.

The hardest part won't be giving something up. The hardest part will be accepting it matters to someone if he lives or dies.

After last night, he's starting to think Hannibal really means it - that he could see the worst inside of Will and still stay. Still love him. *Love him.* If he accepts that, believes it's even possible, then he has to act on it. He has to.

But if he takes Hannibal's hand, he has to let the Ripper go. Quit the bureau, take a long trip with Hannibal somewhere, maybe even move out of state if he can talk Hannibal into it.

Or he has to catch the Chesapeake Ripper, and catch him fast.

He can't sit around exercising his sick fascination, marinating in anticipation and his own passive death wish. If he is going to have Hannibal in his life the Ripper can't be in it, too, because Will might not be afraid of what the Ripper would do to him, but he's terrified of what could happen to Hannibal, even if the only thing that happens to Hannibal is that Will never comes home.

The fastest way to draw him out would be to go public with Hannibal, but that's also the most dangerous course. Will won't be the only one put at risk. Maybe there's some kind of middle ground? Let it leak to Lounds or someone like her that he's in a relationship without giving a name. Let it become a department rumor. Confirm Beverly's assumptions and whatever speculation Price is entertaining, walk into the classroom smiling and whistling and looking freshly laid. Ask Jack about partner benefits in a hallway full of trainees. If he does all that, and sends Hannibal away for a while --

Hannibal wouldn't go. He wouldn't go any more than Will could go if their situations were reversed.

So, there's really only one way to keep him safe. Will needs to be with him, be there to protect him, until this is over.

Will has to kill the part of his life, the part of himself, that's putting Hannibal in danger.

"Hey," he says, when Hannibal answers the phone. "I made a bunch of picnic stuff. You wanna help me wrangle the dogs home later and indulge me when I try to seduce you on a blanket in the woods?"

*

"You're cheerful," Zeller observes as Will throws his bag down next to the door. "Hey, what happened to your face?"

"This is the second time the Chesapeake Ripper has personally cockblocked me," Will announces just loud enough to carry through most of the restaurant. Jack's head whips up from whatever he was looking at, and Price drops a handful of swabs onto a tabletop.

"Last night's hot date get cut short this morning?" Beverly asks.

"Last night's hot date got cut short last night," Will tells her. Half the techs in the room are pretending not to pay attention now. Will pretends not to notice. "Someone who used to have a thing for him showed up and caused a scene." He points at his lip and the shadow of a black eye. "It kind of ruined the mood."

Jack stares at him in stony silence.

"Anyone we know?" Price asks, with the kind of forced casual air that seems to be trying to imply that there isn't actually some kind of betting pool going on.

Well, if nothing else comes of this, at least Will can make the man's week.

"You remember Hannibal?" Will asks. "He consulted on Hobbs and Sylvestri."

The lack of change in Jack's expression suggests he'd figured it out the second Will let slip that his date was a man. Will wonders if he'd be getting the same look if Jack hadn't seen the bruising on Hannibal's throat at the last crime scene.

"Dr. Lecter," Beverly says flatly, and then her eyebrows go up. "Okay, that is not who I was expecting."

"Expecting?" Will asks, despite himself. "You were expecting someone? Who?"

"I don't know! Some other guy with too many dogs and too many fishing poles. Not Dr. Lecter!" She laughs and punches him in the arm. "Ooh la la. Does he talk dirty to you in… I don't even know where he's from. Does he talk dirty at all? He seems so uptight and proper. And here you are fighting for his honor and everything-"

"This is a crime scene!" Jack snaps, cutting the teasing short. "You can all damned well act like it."

Everyone scurries back to their work. Beverly is the last to go, with a grin and a wink and another punch to the arm.

Jack stalks over to Will, gives him a long look, and then keeps walking. "With me, Graham."

Will was unfamiliar with the restaurant when Jack's call directed him here. A quick look around reveals it to be the bourgiest fucking place Will has ever been inside in his life. As he follows Jack into the manager's empty office, out of sight and sound of the rest of the team, he absently wonders if Hannibal would ever want to bring him somewhere like this. Probably not. Hannibal's food would be better, and to someone actually familiar with old world elegance the place would probably seem kitschy as hell.

Jack shuts the door behind them, points Will toward a chair, and leans on the wall, arms crossed. "I am officially concerned."

Will thinks about the inferior position of the chair, how it will force him to look up at Jack, allow Jack to loom over him and control his space. Trap him. Except it's an illusion, and it

doesn't matter. He takes the chair and crosses his legs, leaning back and keeping his posture open, relaxed. "There's nothing to be concerned about."

"You're fucking your therapist," Jack says, voice low and serious. "That would be enough, but it's not just that, is it? I saw the marks on his throat and the bandage on his wrist. Your lip and your knuckles are split. You were favoring your left leg, on your way in here."

"He was never officially my therapist," Will tells him. "You can't get him in any legal trouble. It might look a little fishy from a certain angle, but beyond the evaluation you had him do just after we met, he never saw me in an official capacity again." Will leans forward and puts both feet on the floor. "All you can do is damage his reputation, which he doesn't actually care about as much as you probably think he does. I care, though. I don't want anything bad to happen to him because of me. Not ever. Which is why I'm going to catch the Ripper for you before I quit the BAU."

Jack's mouth snaps shut. "Quit." He bites out after a second, like the word has a taste and he wants it off his tongue.

"It's bad for me, emotionally. The hours are hell. And it's putting me and the man I love in physical danger," Will tells him. "I might keep teaching, I might go back to purely academic work, or hell, I might retire and become a kept man." Hannibal would get a kick out of that. "But I'm not going to change my mind about working for the BAU." He can see Jack gearing up to try to talk him out of it, so he holds up a hand. "I'm going to catch the Ripper. And then it's over."

"I'm sending you to bureau psych," Jack tells him. "Whatever you two are doing, it's not healthy."

"It's none of your goddamned business," Will says calmly. "And the alternative to catching the Ripper before I quit is quitting right now and letting Hannibal whisk me off to Europe or somewhere, never to return."

For the first time, Jack looks stunned. "You think he'd go along with that plan."

"Pretty sure, yeah. We haven't really discussed it, but he's fluent in five languages I know of and has citizenship and medical qualifications in France. If I batted my eyes right now and asked him to show me Paris, I think he'd be packed by lunchtime."

Jack just stares at him.

"Does Bella like dogs, by the way?" Will asks. "I have one that could have been an actual service dog if he'd been trained younger. Low maintenance, calm, he'll fetch anything you point to or teach him the name for. He could keep her company while you're working. Pets are good for cancer patients."

"What the hell did you do to him?" Jack asks. His voice is cold and flat.

"To Petey?" Will asks.

"To Dr. Lecter."

"I wish I knew," Will admits. "So I could be sure not to stop doing it, whatever it is." He gets to his feet. "You can ask Hannibal if you want but I suspect I know what he'll say, and you won't like it. Not, I repeat, than any of this is any of your business."

He leaves the office then and goes to find the body, which turns out to be in the gleaming stainless steel kitchen. She's been sliced neatly down the center, like their self portrait, but the pieces have been pressed back together. Her skin has been peeled back from the crown of her head, in two neat pieces, the neck, the shoulder, the arms to the elbow, the torso to the navel. It looks like she was wearing a human costume that's been unzipped. Her bowels are full of flowers.

The muscles around her mouth have been cut and pulled back like she's smiling.

"What the hell are you so happy about?" Will asks the corpse.

*

Will doesn't escape the labs until late that night, and while he's pretty sure Hannibal wouldn't mind Will crawling into bed with him even at this hour, Will doesn't have the heart to do it to him. He'll get the dogs in the morning - Hannibal probably has patients - and bring Hannibal their failed picnic at his office for lunch. Then Will can spend the afternoon at Hannibal's house trying to dogproof at least a room or two so the pack won't have to sleep outside.

The blue guest room has hardwood flooring and an ensuite with tile, and the bed frame is iron. If he swaps out Hannibal's nice bedding and brings a pile of dog beds, the dogs can be comfortable there overnight or while the both of them are occupied. It'll do for now, since the weather is mild. None of the dogs are poorly behaved enough to wreak havoc while there's a human around, but Will's not entirely sure he trusts them all one hundred percent if left to their own devices in a new and interesting space. Lucy and Buster will get into the little fishpond if he doesn't put some kind of cover over it, so he should bring some plywood, too.

Will packs three bags and two boxes. He puts the covers off the dog beds into the wash. He piles everything on the porch by the front door, folds down the back seats of his car, and tosses in the ground blanket he'd meant to use for the picnic he'd planned, so there won't be as much fur to vacuum out later.

He switches over the laundry, shuts off the lights, and goes to bed.

He's half-awakened an hour later when the dryer cuts off, rendering the house entirely silent except for the ticking of the kitchen clock. It's only about one in the morning, so he rolls over, hugs a spare pillow to his chest and closes his eyes again.

And then he's awake, because one of the loose boards on the porch just creaked.

Will rolls to look at the front windows, but he doesn't see any shadows. There might be nothing there, or the moon might not be bright enough to tell. Will can't remember whether he locked the door.

He rolls out of the bed, keeping low, and moves toward the front of the house. His rifle is next to the the desk, ammunition in the top drawer, phone charging on top. There's another creak from outside while he's loading, but everything is silent when he moves to the door.

If there's someone out there, Will can't hear them now. The last sound had seemed to come from near the leftmost window, but with nothing since, Will can't be sure where the intruder might be.

There are really only two people Will would ever expect to turn up on his doorstep in the middle of the night. Hannibal would have called first, or at the very least would have knocked or let himself in by now. So, it's not Hannibal.

He wasn't expecting to have this confrontation quite so soon. It's best this way, though. Over and done, one way or the other. If Will is alive tomorrow he won't ever have to talk to Hannibal about his decision to bait the Ripper. And one way or the other, he's finally going to know.

He puts his back against the wall beside the door, away from the windows, and tries the knob. Under his slow and careful touch, it turns quietly - unlocked, then. If the Ripper had gotten here five minutes ago, with the dryer still running, he'd have found Will asleep.

With any luck, he thinks Will's asleep, now. He might have peeked in and seen him in the bed, before Will woke, or he might make an assumption based on the hour and lack of lights. It could be enough.

Will turns the knob until it clicks. He crouches so his head will be at an unexpected height and rests his rifle on his forearm, butt braced against his shoulder. With the muzzle of the gun brushing the door frame just above the strike-plate, Will kicks the base of the door as hard as he can and moves forward.

The door doesn't hit anything; it just bangs against the exterior wall and bounces back. Something hits the barrel of the rifle from his blind side, knocking it down and tipping the butt up, over the fulcrum of his forearm, to clock him hard in the jaw. And then the Ripper has him by the arm, dragging him out of the safety of his house and into the night.

Will hits the porch column and rolls, turning to defend himself from the next blow, just in time to see his rifle kicked aside and Christian lunging for him with what looks like a hunting knife.

Fucking *Christian.* Not the Ripper. Will finds himself snarling, more angry at the man for not being the Ripper than for attacking him in the first place. Will ducks out of the way of the first knife slash but catches the second near his elbow as he protects his face. Will ignores the pain of the cut and follows through with the move, striking Christian hard in the bicep with his elbow, forcing Christian's knife hand away from their bodies.

Will gets a good shove in and forces Christian back a step. "You're assaulting a federal agent," Will tells him. He dodges the next slash by moving fast to his right, away from the porch railing so he won't be so boxed in.

"You don't get to hide behind your badge," Christian tells him. "Just because Dr. Lecter's too scared to press charges for what you did to him-"

Will bends and lunges forward, trying to get under Christian's guard while he's talking. Everything he has is concentrated on getting the knife out of Christian's grip. While there's still a blade in play, Will can't afford a single misstep.

He gets cut again, this time across the shoulder, and thanks whoever's listening that Christian doesn't seem to know how to use a knife effectively in close quarters. Will keeps his head bent, protecting his face and neck, and lets his shoulder absorb a few weak blows as he wrestles Christian's arm out, away from his body. He tries to hyperextend Christian's elbow over the porch rail, tries bashing the man's arm against the wood, but he doesn't let go.

In the scuffle, they shift enough that Christian is able to get a more solid hit to Will's liver, making him gasp in pain. Christian goes for his face, next, maybe trying for his eyes, and Will turns his head, tries to keep low, tries to bite. It throws him off balance enough for Christian to shove them both off the porch steps to the ground.

Will hits the gravel hard, the wind knocked out of him even before Christian's knee to his gut. He clings to Christian's arm with both hands, now; it leaves him open to body blows, but it keeps the knife away, and nothing matters as much as keeping the knife away.

"I'm not going to let you hurt him," Christian huffs, breath coming in harsh pants.

"I'm not-" Will tries, but he can't get the air with Christian on top of him, pummeling him with his free hand. He clocks Will in the temple, making his teeth ache and his vision swim. Will loses his grip on Christian's knife-arm.

He has maybe half a second, a second at most, while Christian jerks back to reposition himself. Will uses it to roll to the side and reach under the porch steps. As he gropes blindly, he feels the weight of Christian's body over him, pinning his legs. His fingers close on a wooden handle, and he uses the weight on him for leverage, his whole torso coming up off the ground as he swings as hard as he can for Christian's head.

The short shovel hits his attacker in the face with a clang, sending him over backward without so much as a shout. Will scrambles across the ground, twisting to get his feet under him, and lunges away, putting distance between the two of them.

Christian is on his ass a few feet away, blinking dazedly. The knife is on the ground, between them.

The shovel in Will's hand is as heavy and old as most of his tools, the thick oak handle rubbed smooth by years of use and hardened by the seasons. It's too short for heavy digging but perfect for cleaning up messes, and it fits under the steps and out of sight. Until today Will has mostly used it to pick up dog shit.

Christian pulls himself to his knees while Will stands panting. He looks like he's not sure where he is or what's happening. He leans forward, almost toppling, and the hand he catches himself with lands inches from the knife.

Will gets a good, two-handed grip, turns the shovel in his hands, and swings it as hard as he can. This time, instead of a metallic clang he gets a crunch as the narrow edge of the tool impacts the side of Christian's head.

It doesn't happen instantly. Christian goes over sideways but he sort of catches himself on a bent arm. He wretches, like he's going to vomit, and then he falls down. The side of his face presses into the gravel at the bottom of Will's front steps. There's blood at the impact site, and, as Will stands there catching his breath, blood from his nose. From his eye.

Will kicks the knife into the grass and limps a few feet, so that he can collapse bonelessly onto the porch steps. At his feet, Christian goes into convulsions.

Once he's able to pry his numb fingers from the handle of the shovel, he reaches into his pocket. Pulls out his phone.

"I need you," he says, once the call goes through and he's no longer alone with a dying man. "Hannibal. *I need you.*"

Chapter End Notes

Hello to the lovely ladies from the Comicon Meat-up! I did promise y'all I'd spent Saturday before dinner sitting in the park in my flower crown writing about Will murdering someone with a shovel. :)

Yuinō

Chapter Summary

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>
> It feels like his heart skips a beat. Like a record scratch, and the world restarting. "Help me?"
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> "Yes," Hannibal says. "You did this for me, Will. Let me do this for you."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will isn't sure how long it takes Christian to die. Too long, is the only measurement that makes sense. He lies at Will's bare feet, bleeding and seizing and making little noises for an eternity.

If Christian were an animal and Will found him like this, Will would pick up the knife and cut his throat. If Christian were an animal, finishing him quickly would be a mercy. If Will does that now, though, it will be murder, even more clearly than the second blow of the shovel had been. He considers it anyway, and eventually decides he doesn't actually care if Christian is suffering; anyway, he'd get blood everywhere.

Hannibal arrives at some point after Christian finally goes silent and still. Will stays where he is, perched on the porch steps by the body. As the Bentley pulls up and illuminates the scene, Will keeps his hands on his knees so Hannibal can see them.

How Hannibal will react to this is still uncertain. Watching Will beat a man up is one thing; murder is another. And it was murder. He needs Hannibal to know that.

Will watches Hannibal exit his vehicle and pause, door open, engine still running and lights still on. He watches the expression on Hannibal's face, which is harder to read than usual. Then Hannibal shuts the car door and approaches slowly, and Will watches him come closer.

"I killed him," he says, when Hannibal stops to examine the body. "He's dead."

Hannibal crouches and rests his inexplicably gloved hand on Christian's chest, then his throat. "Yes," he confirms after a moment. "He is."

"He attacked me," Will says, which sounds more defensive than he intended, so he adds, "I could have let him live. I should have. He was dazed and hurt. I should have arrested him."

Hannibal stands and turns, looking right at him. "Yet you did not."

Will swallows under his scrutiny. "I didn't." With his back to the headlights, Hannibal's face is deeply in shadow. Will can't tell what he's thinking at all. "He put his hands on you," he adds when Hannibal still doesn't move. Will tries to keep his voice level, not wanting Hannibal to think he's trying to excuse what he did, like he's upset or regretful; he's not.

Hannibal moves then, posture relaxing as he approaches and kneels beside Christian's body, at Will's feet. He takes Will's hand. His eyes are dark and glittering, his mouth soft. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Will says quickly, and then, when Hannibal pulls his hand into the light and inspects his ragged knuckles, "a little. He cut me." He takes a shaky breath. "I should have called the police. Or Jack, maybe."

"I take it you did not?"

Will shakes his head.

"I'm glad you called me instead," Hannibal says. He brings Will's hand up to his lips and kisses the split skin there. "Will you let me help you?"

Will breathes a joyless little huff of laughter. "Help me? Call your very good lawyer, hold my hand until they book me, visit me in prison?"

"Will," Hannibal says softly. He squeezes Will's hand. "You know that's not what I mean. Will you let me help you?"

It feels like his heart skips a beat. Like a record scratch, and the world restarting. "Help me?"

"Yes," Hannibal says. "You did this for me, Will. Let me do this for you."

Will stares into Hannibal's eyes, and all he can see is love. No fear. No hesitation. He nods.

Hannibal leans forward and kisses him softly. "Come inside." He stands and tugs Will up by his hand.

He leads Will inside and guides him to sit on the bed. "You've had a shock," Hannibal tells him. "I'm going to get you a drink, and you're going to rest for a bit." Will opens his mouth to protest, but Hannibal touches gentle fingers to Will's lips, silencing him. "Just for a bit."

Will nods, and watches Hannibal head into the kitchen and fetch the whiskey down from the cabinet over the fridge. How does he even know where Will keeps it? He seems so calm. He didn't even seem surprised, when he saw Christian on the ground. He didn't hesitate before touching Will.

"You said he cut you," Hannibal says from the kitchen. The words draw Will's attention to the pain of his wounds. "Where are you hurt?"

"My arms," Will says. He examines himself. "I don't think it's bad."

"You may not be feeling pain normally, at the moment," Hannibal tells him. There's the sound of running water, then Hannibal crosses the living room and crouches in front of Will. "Take off your shirt, please?"

Will obliges him. Once the shirt is off, Hannibal hands him the whiskey and starts cleaning his wounds with a damp cloth. Will takes a long draw from the glass and coughs from the burn. "I thought at first he was the Ripper," Will confesses.

Hannibal's hands on him go still for just a breath, and then he's nudging Will back, against the pillows. "I noticed your rifle on the porch. And your bags."

"I told Jack about us," Will says, suddenly full of things he needs to tell Hannibal or risk bursting. "I told the whole department. It's probably on Tattlecrime by now."

"You hoped to draw your killer out," Hannibal says, because he always knows exactly how Will's mind works, sometimes better than Will himself. "You hoped to make yourself a target." He has a roll of bandage in his hand that Will didn't know he owned, and he starts wrapping Will's wounds.

"I wanted to end it," Will says. "You're in danger as long as he's still out there and fixated on me. I told Jack about us, and I gave him my notice. I told him I was going to catch the Ripper, to protect you, and then I was done, and if he made a big stink about it I was going to run away with you to Paris or somewhere and leave Jack to hang."

Hannibal drops the bandages and seizes Will's face in his gloved hands, holding him there while he surges up and forward, kissing him fast and hard. "My darling, wonderful boy-"

"This would be a really terrible and inappropriate time to ask you to spend the rest of your life with me," Will says, except the last few words disappear into Hannibal's mouth as he's kissed again. He kisses back properly this time, reaching up to clutch at Hannibal and draw him closer, trying to tug him onto the bed.

"Yes," Hannibal says, and Will knows he isn't talking about timing. He kisses Will for a few minutes more but resists his pull. "You have to let me go for a moment, love. As happy as I would be to linger, there is much to do before your neighbors wake." He pecks Will on the lips one final time and stands.

Will lets him finish tying off the bandage. He catches and kisses Hannibal's hands when he's done, until Hannibal pulls away and presses the whiskey glass back into his grip. "I'm fine, now," Will tells him. "Let me come help. What are you going to do?"

"Finish your drink," Hannibal insists. "Take ten minutes. Let the bleeding stop, at least. I will take care of everything."

"Fine, fine," Will agrees. He looks up at Hannibal. "Would you really do it? Run away with me? Leave our lives and our jobs and our houses and everything? Just start over somewhere new, with no Jack and no Ripper?"

"Yes," Hannibal says again, in exactly the same thick voice he'd used before. He bends and presses a kiss to the top of Will's head. "Now rest. Don't worry about anything."

Will sinks back against the pillows and smiles to himself as Hannibal moves to the door. Resting is a good idea. He feels exhausted, all of a sudden. He just needs a moment to get himself together.

*

Will doesn't understand at first that the pounding isn't just in his head. He rolls over and curls in on himself, pulling the pillow over his face as he goes. Everything is too bright, too loud, like he's been drinking.

Was he drinking? Will rolls a bit further and peeks out from under the pillow at the clock on his nightstand. Is it seven-twenty-two in the morning or evening?

When he looks, the light seems to indicate evening. There is a uniformed sheriff's deputy banging on his window.

Everything comes rushing back all it once, and the rush of adrenaline that floods him is so sudden and sharp it's like he's been dropped into ice water. "*Shit*."

Where is Hannibal? Why did Hannibal let him sleep? Will sits up and looks around frantically, trying to find some sign of the other man. There are some dishes in the sink, but Will seems to be alone in the house.

Hannibal wouldn't have made a meal with a body still out there in the yard, would he? Surely not. They'd be breaking the door down by now if there were a corpse out there.

Why did he let Will sleep - and hell, *how* did Will sleep so long, and sleep through Hannibal cooking and whatever else he did? What did he do with Christian's body? Put it in the shed, maybe, or took it away in his car -

Oh, no. If Hannibal was caught somehow with the body, that would explain why he isn't here. It would explain the deputy at the door. He must not have blamed Will for it, or there'd be more than one cop on his porch, but if Hannibal had been caught and the entire goddamned Bureau knew they were lovers - which they do, now, because Will is a fucking idiot with terrible timing - surely Jack or Internal Investigations or someone from the DoJ would want to talk to Will?

The deputy at the window looks impatient, but his gun is still strapped into the holster. Why are his curtains open, anyway? His front curtains are never open. God, everything feels….feels *wrong*.

Will raises a hand and nods at the deputy, who steps back from the window and looks around. Will grabs a cleanish shirt - a shirt without blood on it, anyway - and pulls it over his bandages before hurrying to the door. He doesn't want the deputy to spend any more time looking around outside than he has to.

Will cracks open the door and leans into the gap. "Hi. Can I help you?"

The deputy's name tag says 'G. Booth.' Up close he seems more excited than impatient, and painfully young. "Mr. Graham?"

"Am I going to regret saying yes?" Will asks.

"Jack Crawford at the FBI wanted someone to come out and get you." Deputy Booth bounces slightly on his toes. "He couldn't get you on the phone and he needs you to come look at something immediately."

And this kid volunteered to make the drive, because who wouldn't jump at the chance to work with the FBI? "Christ," Will says. He cranes his neck and peers behind Booth, looking over the porch and the yard. There's no sign of what happened last night. Something unclenches inside him, but not by much. "Did anybody warn you that there's a serial killer stalking me and you might have walked into something messy or dangerous?"

Booth stops bouncing.

"Whatever," Will mutters. "Give me five minutes."

He can easily foresee how bad attempted conversation would go, so once he's dressed he insists on taking his own car. Booth escorts him, lights blazing. Will didn't even ask where they were going or why. Maybe ten minutes out it becomes clear they aren't heading for Quantico, so it's probably a crime scene. Well, fuck. Just what he needs.

His phone is charged up to two percent when he tries calling Hannibal the first time. He doesn't get an answer, and it makes his guts even tighter. He tries again. They cross into Maryland.

"Call me back," he tells the voicemail when Hannibal doesn't pick up on the fifth attempt. Booth turns off the highway in Annapolis and leads him to a huge red-brick church surrounded by police cars and flashing lights.

"Thanks," Will tells Booth once they've parked, and then he leaves him standing by their cars, ignoring the hopeful look on his face.

They're at a church campus, and this is the Ripper, so the body isn't going to be in a hallway or a classroom. Sure enough, as Will approaches the big front door of the sanctuary, he can hear Jack's voice, loud but muffled and incomprehensible. Will steps inside and looks around, taking in the gestalt of the scene.

The building is impressively sized but done in a simple gothic design. Inside, the sanctuary is anything but simple - the ceiling a deep lapis blue starred by ivory columns, gilding on the surfaces like icing on a cake. As he walks up the center aisle, through forensic techs swabbing and tweezing among the pews, he can't drag his eyes away from the ornate altarpiece. Five white wooden spires with five niches and five statues in full color, Mary at the center and… Will's not sure. Maybe that's St. Ann over on the left. Golden frescos on the wall behind. It's beautiful in a way that Will wasn't aware American churches could be, at

least outside New Orleans. When Will looks straight up, it's like staring at the sky at dusk through the ribcage of a giant.

"What do you mean nothing's missing?" Jack demands. Will looks down to see Jack has Zeller backed up against one of the pews. "If you're going to try to tell me this isn't him-"

"I didn't say that," Zeller protests. "I just said everything was present and accounted for. He took everything out and put it all back in."

Will approaches them and puts a hand on Jack's arm to deflect his attention from poor Zeller. "What's going on?"

"What's going on?" Jack turns, focusing his ire on Will. "What's going on is twenty-four bodies, fifteen of them in the last three months. Nine kills in as many years and then *this* goddamned orgy of violence and obsession. I've got Justice and the director breathing down my neck, I've got you acting even weirder than usual, and I have a pile of fucking corpses this sicko has dedicated to you, and now we've got another major pattern break!"

Will frowns. From where they're standing, he can only see a leg on the altar steps. "What kind of pattern break?"

"Escalation," Jack says. "*More* escalation, beyond the fact we have a body showing up every other day now. And yet, unlike every other killer I've ever chased, escalation isn't coming with carelessness. There's no more evidence at this scene than there has been at any other, so far. And this time he didn't take anything."

Will freezes in place. "What?"

"There aren't any organs missing," Zeller tells him. "I cut them apart so we could bag them and everything sort of spilled out. He took these guys apart and put them back together again - I'm guessing with the pieces scrambled, but it will be hard to tell until we get them into the lab."

"There are two victims?" Will asks. That's new. No wonder Jack is so worked up. He takes a step back so he can head for the bodies.

"Yeah," Jack says, "So I need you to tell me what the hell is going on that would make him double up on us."

Jack dogs his heels as he rounds the photographer and the others busy standing around gawping. "Jack, I haven't even seen the-"

Everything shatters.

Two men before the altar. They would have been on their knees, locked in an embrace. The bloodstain on the carpet is too small for any other position, and the way their abdomens are split, the cut stitches around the mouth and chest and belly, the ribs removed, what Zeller said, it all suggests they were stitched together when the police first arrived. Fused into one

being, now torn apart to reveal what Zeller had described, organs swapped and linked strangely, like conjoined twins sharing a liver. And nothing missing.

Nothing missing, because The Chesapeake Ripper has already taken his trophy.

One of the dead men has thick dark hair and deeply tanned skin, maybe Southwest Asian.

The other body is Christian's.

Someone is talking. After a while he hears his name. Someone is shaking him. The motion increases and Will's knees buckle.

Hannibal. *Hannibal.*

He's sitting down, and there's a bright light in his eyes, hands on his face.

Protein scramble. Chicken soup. Fois gras, kidney pie, velvet steak and home-cured ham. Will feels bile in his throat and swallows hard.

"-annibal."

"What?" Will says, turning away from Zeller's touch to look at Beverly.

"Do you want me to call him?" She asks.

Oh god.

"No." Will says. He pushes at them until he's able to get out of the pew they put him on. Jack is only a few feet away, looking concerned. Concerned, and hopeful, really. He's hoping Will had some kind of epiphany.

Will starts laughing.

"What the hell, Will?" Zeller asks. He has his hand on Will's back, like he expects him to go down again. Will isn't so sure he won't.

"I'm done," Will tells Jack. When Jack's brow tightens but he doesn't say anything, Will decides Jack didn't understand. "I quit. I resign. I'm done."

"No you don't," Jack tells him, voice a threat like distant thunder.

"We'll get someone to take you home," Beverly tells him. "Jack, you know he's not-"

"No, I mean it. Ask Jack. I gave my notice at the last one." He jerks his chin toward the alter. "This was the last straw. I'm done."

"You said you'd quit after you caught the Ripper," Jack says.

"The Ripper's done, too." Will isn't feeling much, right now, but he's feeling pretty certain of that assessment. "This will be the last, at least for a while. Unless I'm the last, but if I am I don't think you'd find me."

"Will," Zeller says beside him, quiet and careful. "Whatever just happened-"

"Doesn't matter," Will interrupts. "I'm fucked either way. You're never going to catch him, Jack. He's too good. He's too smart. Too careful and quick on his feet. He isn't escalating. He had a specific goal in mind the whole time, and now he's got what he wanted, so he's done. Or he's done with the parts you'll be able to see."

"He got what he wanted. What did he want?" Jack asks. "Based on the rest of your profile I was under the impression it was you."

Will laughs so hard he thinks he's going to cry. He covers his mouth with his hand and sinks his teeth into the meat of his palm.

Beverly is pulling him to her. He doesn't understand what she's doing at first, tries to fight her, but it's a hug. She's giving him a hug. She pries his hand away from his mouth and holds it in hers.

"I'm ordering you to go straight to bureau psych," Jack tells him. "First thing tomorrow morning. If you aren't at the office by eight I'm going to put you in protective custody. I am not accepting your resignation."

"Fine," Will says. He presses his eyes hard to Beverly's shoulder for the space of six heartbeats, and then he lets her go and steps back. "Sure. Okay. Psych in the morning."

Jack stares at him for a long moment. "You aren't going home alone."

"I won't go home alone," Will agrees.

"You can stay with me if you don't want to go to the dorms," Beverly tells him. She starts fishing in her pocket, probably for a key. "I'll call Saul and let him know."

"Oh, no, the dorms are fine," Will says. "It'll save me a trip in the morning."

"Let us get you a ride," Zeller says quietly. "You can't drive right now, Will."

"No, it's okay," Will tells them. "The deputy who brought me is still outside."

Booth is indeed still outside when Will gets to the cars. Will waves at him before getting into his own car and driving north.

That bastard.

Every meal. Every time he stared at Will's mouth around a fork with rapturous attention. Every time he pressed him to take a second helping. Every morsel fed to him by hand.

Every time he touched Will. Every time he looked at him.

Every time was a lie.

Will pulls over somewhere near the airport and parks behind a donut shop that's already closed for the day. When the car has come to a complete stop, he opens the door and vomits bile onto a faded parking stripe. When he's empty he sits in his car for about half an hour crying and screaming and pulling at his hair.

He pulls into a drive through after that and buys a sprite because his mouth tastes terrible and his stomach won't settle. Once he's drunk about a quarter of it without anything coming up, he gets back on the road to Baltimore proper. He doesn't drive off the bridge into the Patapsco River when he crosses it.

A lot of things make horrible sense, in hindsight. Hannibal's unmentioned childhood scars. His surgical background. And what had he said? 'I killed a patient," and maybe someone, maybe *Miriam Lass* had been looking through confidential medical records and found something that led to him. No wonder he'd switched fields.

Hannibal hadn't let her go as a present. He hadn't needed her anymore because he had a new toy. And Will had been so much fun to play with, surely. He'd been so desperate for affection and acknowledgement, for someone who could see him and know him and care for him anyway.

The murder and cannibalism should matter more than the lies. There's nothing wrong with feeling betrayal, but that should come with moral outrage. The disgust he feels should be with Hannibal and what Hannibal has done; instead, Will just feels disgusted with himself for falling for it.

He remembers a long package in Hannibal's overstuffed fridge the night the Ripper had taken Carson Nahn's arm. Will had picked it up and moved it, to get to the other ingredients. There had been a small smear of blood on the butcher paper.

Rabbit stew and grilled tenderloin, little skewers of satay with peanut sauce, korma, kibbeh, knishes-

Maybe he feels a little disgusted about the rest. But the betrayal - that's *devastating*.

When he gets to Hannibal's, the door is unlocked. Will's been trying to get him to lock it at night for weeks, especially with the Ripper - but no, of course Hannibal hadn't been concerned about a serial killer attacking him.

Oh. He stops for a moment with the door ajar, letting one more revelation sink in. Budge. Hannibal sent Will to him, and then Budge went to *Hannibal*, not to Froidevaux. Had Hannibal wanted Will dead? Hurt? Was it some kind of test?

The house smells good when Will steps inside, and he hates himself for thinking that, because what it smells like - beyond the faint hint of furniture polish and leather and growing herbs - what it smells like is *dinner*.

Something is roasting, and he should be sick again right here in Hannibal's lamp-lit foyer, right on Hannibal's priceless imported rug. He smells something fruity, too, and balsamic vinegar. There's a sense and body memory to it - walk through this door, shut it behind him,

close his eyes and smell for a moment, take off his jacket and hang it, head into the kitchen to try and steal a bite and a kiss. Usually he'd strip off his holster, too. Leave it hanging on the hall-tree by the door.

Tonight, he stands there for a long time in the doorway with his hand on the butt of his service pistol. The only thing he can hear from inside is faint music drifting from the pricey hidden sound system.

Will draws his weapon and steps inside. He doesn't bother closing the door behind himself.

He should have told Jack everything the moment it all came together. Should have confessed, even to killing Christian, to panicking and calling Hannibal for support. He wouldn't even have had to incriminate himself too much - he could make a plausible argument for self-defense. Two blows with a blunt object on his own property, knife wounds on his arms where he'd tried to defend himself. A blood test now would probably turn up whatever Hannibal put in his whiskey last night. Even if he can't get away with what he's done, though, he should have turned on Hannibal like a snake with its tail caught.

But who would have believed him? Weird, twitchy Will Graham. No friends, too many dogs, and fucking his psychiatrist. Jack saw the marks on Hannibal's throat. They're going to investigate Christian. They're going to find out about the fight. The mystery of how Christian had found him isn't mysterious anymore. Will just wonders if Hannibal payed for the man's ticket to the performance, or if he seized on an opportunity, after the fact.

Will passes from the hall into the kitchen, gun raised in Weaver stance. He sweeps his vision and his aim across the room, checking the corners. There's some kind of meat resting on a wooden cutting board on the center island. Plates in twos already garnished - two little plates with little bites of something, two bigger ones with greens and vegetables and open places for the roast. There's some kind of tart under glass, mounds of whipped cream or meringue covering it like fluffy clouds.

Will checks behind the island. He can feel the heat of the oven at his back as he passes it, empty and turned off but recently in use. Hannibal hasn't gone far. Will checks the powder room and the utility room and the hall to the garage. He checks the pantry.

The music changes over to a new song, but it's a gentle fade and probably automated. Will isn't entirely sure where the sound system is located, anyway, so he continues searching the house. He works his way through methodically, room by room, downstairs and then up, leaving the bedroom for last because just looking at it makes him want to cry again.

If Hannibal is in the house, he's hidden somewhere Will has never seen. Will wouldn't put it past him, at this point, to have some kind of hidden room or secret passage. He had to have kept Lass somewhere, after all, and once he started inviting FBI agents into his home for dinner he'd have had to put her somewhere more discreet than a guest room.

When it becomes clear that he's unlikely to find Hannibal - that Hannibal is unlikely to jump out from behind a door and grab him - Will slumps against the wall, letting his arms drop to his sides. He slides down to rest on the floor of the upstairs hall.

After about five minutes he makes himself get up and go back downstairs.

The table is set for two. He'd noted the candles burning when he passed through, but now he takes a moment to examine the whole scene. Candlelight and a fairly sedate centerpiece, just some large white stones and clove-scented dianthus. One of the flowers has been plucked and laid across the folded napkin on the service plate at Will's usual seat.

Will stares at the sweet william blossom for a long time. After a while, he pulls out the chair and sits. He carefully shifts the flower, then unfolds the napkin and places it in his lap.

He places his pistol at his right, beside the soup spoon.

Will leans back in the seat and picks up the flower by the stem. He twirls it between his fingers, then presses it lightly to his lips. The scent is familiar, almost comfortable by now, and the way it feels against his mouth reminds him of something.

Will opens his mouth and lays the flower on his tongue. It's just as tart as he expected.

There's a faint creak from somewhere in the house.

Will reaches out and takes the safety off his gun, then folds his hands in his lap and waits for dinner to be served.

Chapter End Notes

This has been a ride, y'all. Thanks so much to everyone who has commented to let me know what you think, or who has left kudos! I can't express enough how much I've enjoyed talking with you in the comments. This is my first fic in this fandom, and the welcome has been wonderful.

Come hang out with me on tumblr or PM me for my skype if you want to talk more, about Hannibal or about whatever. The more friends I have in a fandom the more likely I am to write for it again ;)

For now... Watch This Space. I may not be done with this universe just yet...

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!